

HANSARD

NOVA SCOTIA HOUSE OF ASSEMBLY

STANDING COMMITTEE

ON

COMMUNITY SERVICES

Thursday, April 15, 2004

Committee Room 1

Foster Care Crisis

Printed and Published by Nova Scotia Hansard Reporting Services

COMMUNITY SERVICES COMMITTEE

Ms. Marilyn More (Chairman)

Mr. Mark Parent

Mr. William Langille

Mr. Gary Hines

Mr. Jerry Pye

Mr. Gordon Gosse

Mr. Russell MacKinnon

Mr. Stephen McNeil

Mr. Leo Glavine

[Mr. Stephen McNeil was replaced by Mr. Gerald Sampson.]

In Attendance:

Ms. Mora Stevens
Legislative Committee Coordinator

WITNESSES

Department of Community Services

Marian Tyson
Deputy Minister

Vicki Wood
Director of Child Welfare

Jill Wilson-Kingston
Provincial Coordinator of Foster Care Services

Tracey Williams
Program Director



HALIFAX, THURSDAY, APRIL 15, 2004

STANDING COMMITTEE ON COMMUNITY SERVICES

9:00 A.M.

CHAIRMAN
Ms. Marilyn More

MADAM CHAIRMAN: I will call this meeting to order. I understand the other Liberal MLAs will be joining us during the meeting so perhaps we will get underway.

Before we start with introductions, I just want to bring to your attention a couple of letters from the Minister of Community Services that were left on your desks for your information. Is there any discussion on those letters?

MR. JERRY PYE: Madam Chairman, if I might, wouldn't it be appropriate to put them on the agenda, later, further down?

MADAM CHAIRMAN: We certainly can.

MR. PYE: So I would recommend that we put them on the agenda further down and then discuss them after the presentation.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Is everyone in agreement that we will move it down under committee business? It is agreed. Thank you.

I believe, Mark, you wanted to add an item to the agenda as well.

MR. MARK PARENT: Sure, and you may want to move this down. I just had a question on the title of today's meeting. I find it somewhat inflammatory and I just want to discuss the titles and how we title. I mean it is Foster Care Crisis. So maybe we want to put that as an agenda item as well at the end and we can discuss that, if that is okay.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Okay, let's start with introductions.

[The committee members introduced themselves.]

MADAM CHAIRMAN: We are also joined at the table by Mora Stevens, our committee clerk.

Welcome to the deputy minister, Ms. Tyson. Would you like to introduce your staff?

MS. MARIAN TYSON: Madam Chairman, I'm Marian Tyson, Deputy Minister of Community Services, and with me on my left is Vicki Wood who is the Director of Child Welfare for Nova Scotia and that includes placement of children in all facilities, including foster care. We are joined by Jill Wilson-Kingston who is directly responsible for the foster care program in the province and by Tracey Williams who has overall responsibility in the department for our programs which would include foster care, among a multitude of others.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: I would like to just, perhaps, give you a little bit of context and then . . .

MS. TYSON: I'm sorry, I've neglected to mention our Communications person who is with us today (Interruptions) Terri Green.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: You're probably aware that at the end of January we heard from representatives from the Federation of Foster Families Nova Scotia and also from the Children's Aid Society. Last Fall, we also heard from Youth in Care, as part of their presentation on their Youth in Care newsletter. A number of concerns were raised about the state of foster care in the province, and so the committee decided to invite you and your officials to come and perhaps give us more background on this situation and to help us understand the current state of foster care, and if there is anything that we can do to support you in this particular, very worthy cause. We invite you to do about a 10-minute presentation.

MS. TYSON: Madam Chairman, I want to say first of all that we very much appreciate the opportunity to be here and to talk about foster care, in particular foster care in the placement system in Nova Scotia for children in need, and also to provide additional information and to correct some of the statements which we were very concerned to read in the transcripts. We're very pleased to be here and to have that opportunity.

Foster care is only one component of the child welfare system. Today, we plan to give you some context of where foster care fits in the placement process. I think there seems to be some confusion about that, and hopefully by going very quickly through that part of the presentation, Vicki Wood will correct some of the misunderstandings.

We believe that the best place for children to be is with their families. As a consequence, when a child has been identified as being at risk of abuse or neglect, then the first course of action through our child welfare agencies and our district offices is to provide support

to the family, if that's possible, and to enable the family unit to remain intact. However, there are times when the child must be taken from his/her natural family and, even with the supports, that sometimes is not enough, so therefore child welfare is compelled to intervene and the child is placed somewhere else. That could be foster care, as one of the options.

While we are continuing to address areas of improvement and while anything can always be improved, we are very proud of our foster care system. We have made enormous strides over the past few years, and we believe we have an excellent system which we will tell you about. Foster care in particular, among all of our placement options, has seen some significant success. We need to continue to recruit new foster parents and to continue to work to retain the homes that we have. We have strategies in place to do that, and those strategies, I'm very pleased to say, are working.

In the past four years, the foster care program has been strengthened. We now have foster care resource teams in each one of the four regions, and those teams are responsible for recruitment and for pre-assessment services for foster families. The teams provide an exceptional level of training, second to none in the country. That training is called the PRIDE Program, and that stands for Parent Resources for Information, Development and Education. That has produced some of the best-prepared foster parents anywhere. Foster families play an integral role in our entire child welfare team, and we truly appreciate the excellent work that they do, together with our social workers every day. With those brief introductory comments, Vicki Wood will give you specifics and details of our program.

MS. VICKI WOOD: Thank you very much for the opportunity to be present today. I thought we would just talk very briefly about the Children and Family Services Act. Foster care, of course, is established through the Children and Family Services Act, look at some placement options for children in the care of the minister and respond to your questions.

I would like to begin by describing how it is that children enter our placement system because that's a key issue - how we're organized as a system, what some of the trends and pressures are, which you've made reference to in your opening remarks, what those initiatives are that we've taken to address those pressures and then specifically foster care initiatives.

We begin by indicating that the Minister of Community Services is responsible for child welfare services. I think that's sometimes misunderstood. Child welfare services are services for the maltreatment of children - abuse and neglect - that's the core function for child welfare. Sometimes I think people think we do all of children's services, but there would be many different children's services cross other departments and other legislation. The minister is responsible for the maltreatment of children.

Child welfare is the most highly regulated field of social work practice. That is because it has the close scrutiny of courts. The legislated mandate is to investigate all reports of alleged

abuse and neglect. Not all reports are founded; however, well over half of them are. When abuse and neglect is substantiated, then child welfare services provides interventions to prevent further abuse from occurring and to assist children to resolve whatever issues they may be struggling with because they have been victims of abuse and neglect.

Specifically, and this again is important, because when we say how do the children come into child welfare and which children are we talking about who are having difficulties that you're referring to in foster care - these are children who have, under Section 22(2) of the Children and Family Services Act, suffered from physical abuse, sexual abuse, severe emotional harm and that includes ongoing exposure to domestic violence - we know more and more of the impact of that - chronic, severe neglect by a parent, an abandoned or orphaned child or a child under 12 years of age who has killed or seriously injured another person and the parent refuses services.

Once we investigate reports of child abuse or neglect and we've substantiated that it has occurred, then the purpose of agencies is to provide services to those families to prevent further harm. Oftentimes that means working with parents on their parenting skills - helping them raise children safely. We provide counselling to children to deal with the effects of abuse and neglect and when children can't remain at home safely - and that's the criteria - can we raise the level of safety in the home sufficient to allow them to remain there. When we can't, then they do leave their home, either temporarily or permanently, and foster care, as the deputy indicated, is one of the services we offer.

How is child welfare organized? I noticed in the Hansard that there was a little confusion about the Children's Aid Society of Nova Scotia. There isn't a Children's Aid Society of Nova Scotia. We're organized by county so that there is a children's aid or family and children's services in every county, which makes up 20. The person who was speaking with you was from Halifax. So, there are 14 children's aids and nine district offices and through that network, every square inch of the province is covered.

In addition to the agencies which investigate abuse and neglect, we have some support organizations - those include residential facilities. We have 31 residential child caring facilities, we have 700-plus foster homes. The Federation of Foster Families is the organization that came and spoke with you - that's their collective organization - the Home of the Guardian Angel and we also have some regional foster resource teams that we've established.

You were talking about pressures and there are pressures. One of the greatest pressures is the rising number of children coming into care. You will see that this slide is going up - this is the Canadian context for a number of children coming into care. If you look to the next slide, you'll see that the Nova Scotia picture mirrors that. That rise in the number of children coming into care has placed pressure - when we say coming into care, we mean children where there has been substantiated abuse and neglect and the safety issues couldn't be resolved at home,

therefore they have been brought into care. That has risen all across Canada. It has created placement challenges - of course it would, as there are many more children. The budget of child welfare in Nova Scotia has grown to try to meet that demand; you can see the increase. You often hear about cuts, but actually there have been no cuts in child welfare; it has continued to rise every year, the resources allocated.

[9:15 a.m.]

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Is this per child in care?

MS. WOOD: No, that's millions. That is for the maintenance of children, what we would pay for children who are in care. You can see that within the last decade it more than doubled, so it is quite substantial and, again, that is something that would have occurred across Canada. So there are pressures in terms of placement. We have a high number of children with special needs, children with emotional behavioural problems arising from the abuse and neglect that they have gone through, so we end up doing rehabilitation with those young people, specifically to resolve this issue.

One of the things that has been difficult - and I have had the pleasure of talking with you about secure care - is that when children have been abused and neglected, and even very tiny children, because of that kind of maltreatment, can go through very tumultuous behaviour, it has been difficult for caregivers to weather those storms during the peak. Another placement pressure, of course, is just the increase of the rate of children coming into care.

I am just going to say quickly, we have brought in some initiatives to address placement broadly, not just foster care, and that is what some of these include. I am going to come specifically to foster care redesigned, because there has been substantial effort in the Department of Community Services with the participation of foster parents and social workers, to redesign how we deliver foster care services so that we can address that pressure.

We had significant consultations through 1998-99. It brought in the formal initiation of the PRIDE project, which the deputy was speaking about. In addition we had some independent research called the Foster Parent Satisfaction Survey of Nova Scotia, and this is what the research findings indicated that foster parents stated they wanted. They wanted improved standards; they wanted standardized reimbursement policies; they wanted to be able to receive specialized and ongoing training to assist them with delivering training to some of these children; they felt that they needed to be better recognized and included by social workers who are working with them, treat them as part of the treatment team; and to develop service agreements.

We introduced changes into the foster care system in a building block approach; that is, there was a budget established, there were training goals established, there were policy goals - and over the last several years those have been brought in incrementally. In 2000-01, it

included a very comprehensive training system with the federation - whom you met - to assist us with the recruitment, training, and selection of foster parent trainers. That means that the foster parents themselves are now training foster parents, which has been a wonderful boost for everyone, a wonderful enrichment. We created foster care resource teams to provide ongoing support to the foster system.

We began a system of providing foster parents - recognizing their skill set we began to provide them with fees separate from the maintenance of children, just recognizing their levels of training. So in that year we introduced the \$60 per month payment system. In 2001-02, we raised that level of skill-based fees from \$60 to \$90, which means that we brought in the second level, and it's based on a level system. We provided court training to all foster families and all agency staff and this was a great accomplishment, it has been very well received and we're really second to none in terms of our training the foster parents. We brought in the separate increment, in terms of skill level, fee-based services to foster parents to \$150 per month.

In 2002-03, we incorporated other kinds of training, brought in some new enhanced reimbursements to foster parents to make sure that they were paid for attending training, even if they expressed an interest in training, I mean at fostering, even before they necessarily committed to it. We implemented the advanced level of care which is \$300 a month, and we've established a specialized program of up to \$100 a day for children with those very high levels of need. We couldn't do that earlier because the foster parents hadn't received the training sufficient to be able to actually know how to take care of the children and manage those children.

So, we will hear about the decline in foster families, there has been a decline in foster families across North America, it's not a crisis, in the sense that this is something new and sudden that requires an immediate response, it's a concern all across Canada and across North America, and it reflects the changing demographics of society, people are aging and aging out. What it has meant is that provinces, including Nova Scotia, have tried to proactively address that by recruiting new foster parents and taking efforts to maintain the ones that we do have, recognizing that retiring out is occurring.

We have in terms of active open foster homes, we've actually had an increase. We had in 1999-2000, 428; 451; 429, we saw a little blip there; and last year, 518, and we're feeling pretty confident that's the direction we're continuing on. As I say, one of things that people talk about are the people leaving foster care, and there was a very large group of people leaving foster care, and they do continue to leave. As I say, part of that is just simply changing demographics, aging population. What we can see is that the rate at which people have been retiring and leaving is declining, and so, in 1999-2000, close to 500 left. As you go down and you put the two together, over the last year we had 261 leave. So the rate of decline is leaving and the rate of open active foster homes is increasing. So though there is lots to improve, I would say that the efforts that the department has made in terms of training, enhancing

resources, putting the supports in place, are bearing fruit, because we are seeing things going in the right direction. Thank you, Madam Chairman.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Well thank you, very much. As are all the issues we seem to deal with, it's a very complex one and there seem to be many, many sides to it. I don't know if the other members share my confusion on something, but I'm going to ask you to clarify it for just from the beginning. What about the children who are in care, I thought of the minister, because of very severe behavior and emotional problems?

MS. WOOD: I would like to address that because I found that was a confusion when I presented on secure care. The children's system mirrors the adult system, and I think that there's a general confusion in the media sometimes that there's just sort of a generic children's services, and the Minister of Community Services is responsible for them. Just as in the adult system, when someone is in conflict with the law, there's policing, probation, incarceration, including treatment interventions and rehab, for children who are in conflict with the law, youth. That's with the Minister of Justice. Children who have severe emotional, behavioural, and mental illness, just as in the adult system, are part of the health system, and they are with the Department of Health. The Minister of Community Services is responsible for children who are being abused and neglected by their caregivers. Where the confusion may come in, is that due to abuse and neglect, those children often need rehabilitation services specific to abuse and neglect. They do have emotional behavioural issues and we do our best to address them, but those arise from abuse and neglect. They do not arise from other kinds of issues like mental illness, or whatever, that Children's Mental Health deals with.

So you have the main system for children with emotional behavioural problems; mental health, Children's Mental Health. You recognize that on the Community Services side, children with abuse and neglect need a specialized intervention when their emotional behavioural problems are about that. On the Justice side, there are also some targeted mental health services for those children specific to what some of their issues are, but I do think that that is confusing for people. That's why secure care is for children who have been abused and neglected and whose behaviour spikes for that reason. There are the other services for children with just generic - when I say generic, I should say there are universal programs that are available for everyone in the public to access them, but that system is the Children's Mental Health system and they have comparable to what we have. They have more of what we have, probably a much broader range.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: So that must put pressure on you, though, to actually be able to identify the reason for the misbehaviour in order to place?

MS. WOOD: We have no mandate, no legal right to even go in a home unless we begin first with a report of child abuse or neglect and go through a thorough investigation and substantiate that. Then the second level of that would be, if we do, we offer services voluntarily

to families to try to assist and resolve whatever concerns there are. If they're not willing to accept those services and we continue to be concerned about the safety of the child, we would need to take that to court and it would really then be a judge who would determine that and a judge would indicate, yes, that child is in need of protection and that child needs to come into care. So we have the authority to do it on an emergency basis, we could apprehend on the weekend or something, but we would have to be in court immediately to justify it. So really we are not burdened with making that decision, it's really a judicial one.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Mr. Pye.

MR. PYE: Madam Chairman, first of all, my question will be to the presenter to be centred around what happens to those children who come into the immediate care of the minister. First of all, I want to say that I did not attend a meeting in which the Children's Aid Society had talked about foster care at a previous meeting of the Standing Committee on Community Services, but I did read the Hansard report. On Page 4, I just want to make comments with respect to what I believe are comments from Barbara Williams. She said, "We do not have sufficient foster homes, we don't have enough numbers in our province. Foster parents are leaving as quickly as they're entering the system. Some children have to be placed in situations that we could consider less than desirable for them."

So last night after looking at that, Madam Chairman, I wrote down some concerns that I had and I'm just wondering, other provinces have backup systems, emergency shelters for example, for children who require care but cannot be placed in a foster home right away. For whatever reason, we seem to lack those supports. The SOS Children's Village in Margaretsville, where I had met with Ron Rector who was actually the chairman of that committee at the time that they were being shut down, and they had some concern with respect to what would happen to the children once that centre closed. I guess they provided such a service but was shut down and we do know that. Children who would have ended up in homes designated for children with behavioural issues, it is not fair to the children because that is fine for those children who have the problem, but it's not a suitable environment for those children who do not. We know kids wind up on the street, especially those between 16 and 19. Even younger children wind up with no place to stay.

So my question to you, I believe it might go to Ms. Woods instead of the deputy minister, what is the position of the department to locate children who come into the immediate care of the minister? That's my first question. My second question to you is, and I will give you both of them at the same time, in this province, do we have an appointed position of a child advocate, and if we don't, why don't we?

MS. WOOD: For your first question, I'm going to refer back to a slide where I showed that we have support organizations. So in addition to the 700-whatever foster homes, we actually have 31 licensed residential childcare facilities. SOS was one of those.

[9:30 a.m.]

MR. PYE: One of those players.

MS. WOOD: Yes. It didn't represent that field. I mean no disrespect, there was a time in which SOS was a very vital service, however, when SOS closed it was not providing the kind of service that we're talking about here, although I realize that was in the Hansard. It had, at one point, quite a thriving population of children a number of decades ago. It was based on an old orphanage-type model which really isn't relevant to today's kind of delivery. It was placed in an isolated area of the community, and when we closed it, rather than saying that it had provided this very high level of care - there were nine children there: only three went into residential programs, three others went home and another three went to foster care. It wasn't actually providing the kind of care that I think you're referring to, which is this high-needs.

In those licensed residential childcare facilities, in every region, we have organizations which provide that kind of very high-needs. SOS was not one of those. There is one in that region.

MR. PYE: Excuse me for interjecting. Can I say, and would it be fair to say, that although Margaretsville was not a high-needs area for those particular children, it was in fact a place where children could stay until they were situated into a foster care environment.

MS. WOOD: Yes, it was one of 32.

MR. PYE: That's right, but it was still there for that need.

MS. WOOD: Yes. The other thing I wanted to address on that is there's sort of, I think, some kind of a background assumption that there aren't any vacancies in any of those facilities, and so we don't have any. I look at the vacancy numbers every month. We always have vacancies in every one of our residential programs. The issue has not been not having a place, the issue has been how to manage some of the periods of very difficult behaviour that children go through. What happens is that then those facilities or foster parents would discharge the child, because they just didn't know what to do. That's why our interventions have been training based, rather than opening more placements. We have enough placements. We have not had enough people who knew how to manage the storms.

So in addition to opening secure care, which helps with that crisis period in the child's development, and in addition to the very extensive multi-year training program for foster parents, we undertook the same for our residential programs. One of the slides I skipped over, we brought in international experts and did a whole year of very specialized training with the supervisors and staff within the residential programs. The issue hasn't been vacancies, it's been not knowing quite how to manage some of the complexity of the needs of the children.

The second question, a child's advocate. Some provinces have followed an advocate model, other provinces have followed an ombudsman's model. Nova Scotia doesn't have advocates but it has an Ombudsman's Office, and the Ombudsman has an Assistant Ombudsman/Children's Ombudsman. So they do have a whole section devoted to children's rights and needs. We do work closely with them, and the person in charge of that, her name is Janet McKinnon.

MS. TYSON: Can I just add that you referenced the Hansard, that the comment was that more homes are leaving than coming in, and as you saw from the slides, that is not correct. The trend is that more foster parents are coming in and fewer are leaving, so the trend is actually in the right direction, as Vicki Wood indicated.

MR. PYE: Thank you. I think that you made that clear with the presentation earlier. However, I'm just at odds as to how the Children's Aid Society would have a conflicting statement compared to yours. I would imagine that both have up-to-date statistics with respect to that issue. Maybe yours is more up to date than the Children's Aid Society and I know that they have the computerized system - or they said they did - and they do a lot of tracking of this.

MS. TYSON: Yes. I think to be fair to them, that is one of 20 agencies and we have the province-wide statistics.

MR. PYE: True. I won't debate the statistics today, that's for sure. I'm not in a position to.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Gerald, you're next.

MR. GERALD SAMPSON: I have three questions, if it's possible in the time to answer them and maybe I will start from number three and work back. I really don't envy your position. They say your cup runneth over; well, your plate runneth over, I'm sure and you're doing a fine job from what I could see from your presentation. Of course, there's always room for improvement. Anyway, doing what you're doing is commendable.

What my concern is, what measures are there around - you mentioned adoption and I'm surprised that we still have to go to foreign countries to adopt children when we have so many children in need of adoption in our own province. Could somebody just give me a reasonable answer to that?

MS. TYSON: I can respond to that. Adoption is one of the areas that we need to work on and improve and we are now doing that. We have a small team which has recently completed research across the country on what others are doing, what does the legislation say, what are the best practices, and we are hoping to put additional staff in place and take additional measures over the next year to improve that system. It needs improvement. In so doing, it will have the added effect of relieving pressure on the foster care system as well.

MR. GERALD SAMPSON: The second one is that you've proven that there's a rising number of children coming into care. Are there one or two specific reasons you can point to for that? Is it the social nature of our population now? Can you pinpoint why there are so many, why the increase all of a sudden, or is it a steady and gradual thing?

MS. WOOD: It has been steady and gradual, but it is very alarming. I just spent two days on a steering committee for national research on the reported Canadian incidence of child abuse and neglect and had the researcher remind me that we really don't know the answer to why. It's alarming. The number of substantiated cases of abuse and neglect are going up and that's in conflict with the fact that the number of children in Canada is actually declining. We know that the rates of child sexual abuse have been going down, but we're at a loss to explain why the incidence is higher, so we really truly don't know.

We have some ideas of why it might be occurring - one of them is that with greater awareness of child abuse that people are reporting more. When we look at the highest number of people making reports of abuse and neglect, they are police and schools. In the past, most reports came from families themselves. It may just reflect a greater awareness of other professionals. That's one theory. I think in truth we don't know why. It's a concern.

MR. GERALD SAMPSON: My final question, one that I talk about with great emotion when it comes to abuse of children, how do today's statistics compare with the known practices of abuse that have come forward in the past? I emphasize that specifically because yesterday there was a young man on a local radio show who spent a long time discussing how he went from foster home to foster home to foster home and abuse to abuse to abuse - some of it that was almost animalistic, I suppose, in nature, the way the boy was treated. He's managed to become a very articulate, well-controlled, adjusted individual, by the sound of him on the radio, and he is now suing because of the abuse.

What I'm wondering is, as a result of the known abuses of the past, what safeguards have been put in place to prevent or discover or stop any of that? It won't be perfect, but how are we recognizing and stopping it now or controlling it, as compared to what happened in the past?

MS. WOOD: I think there are a number of things which have been brought to bear in the last decade, decade and a half that have changed that scenario. The first has to do with the appropriate screening of people who volunteer with children, who work with children professionally, who foster children, who work in residential programs. The creation of child abuse registries was very important in that, as well as police checks. So screening, in and of itself, is a very important tool because children, of course, are very vulnerable and dependent on adults, so that's critical.

At a secondary level, training and pre-screening allow you to determine and allow the people themselves to determine whether or not this is for them. Very little of that occurred in the past - I'm talking decades ago, not recent past - when you go through old files and see it really didn't take much to work with children or to foster children.

The third thing that I would say makes a big difference is the establishing of protocols, which make sure that if anybody in any facility or residential program, foster program, whatever, there are agreed-upon protocols between child welfare agencies, police, other people who work in the community that instantly kick in the moment there's any hint whatsoever. The fostering stops or the person has to leave the residential program, and we conduct an investigation. That is always at arm's length, so you're never in a situation of investigating your colleague, who you might have a bias towards.

I will just answer the fourth thing, because I think it's important, too. That is the education of children themselves, in terms of their rights and responsibilities. One of the things that the Department of Community Services has done with the Ombudsman's Office has been working with them to establish a complaints procedure and a review procedure, visits with the Ombudsman's Office, so that children themselves know that they have an independent party to complain to.

MR. GERALD SAMPSON: Just one follow-up comment on what you said. I will use myself as an example. Okay, you take me, I have a reasonably good reputation, I have a reasonably good income, I have a reasonably good home, so I should be a prime candidate to be a foster parent, the same as people go through the business ordeal and get major loans and then default on the loans because there's no follow-up. So if I were to be that new foster parent and do all the right things and become a foster parent, even with grandchildren, well, I could be looking for some child and my little hidden secret is to take this child and abuse them. So, it's the follow-up that needs to be done in my estimation. Do you do that?

MS. WOOD: Absolutely. Again, I skipped a slide and the slide I skipped, maybe I shouldn't have. It talked about when foster parents and the Foster Parent Satisfaction Survey wanted to talk about enhanced policies. Certainly one of the policies we've enhanced, and we're about to release a new child in care manual, which further increases the expectations and obligations on social workers to be constantly available to the foster parents; it's not a here you are, leave the child and then go back a year later. We've built in by standard - the department has built in by standard how many contacts are necessary. (Interruptions)

MR. GERALD SAMPSON: Thank you very much, Madam Chairman.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: On the speakers' list, I have Mark, Bill, Russell and then Jerry for the second time. Mark.

MR. PARENT: Thank you for your presentation. You must have been somewhat surprised and perhaps a bit frustrated to see the title of the presentation, in light of the hard work you've been doing that is shown on these slides, where homes have been opened faster and the trend is in the positive direction. You've established quite well that the title was somewhat in error. I just wanted to pick up very quickly on the comment that was made by my colleague about adoption and your comments.

I'm not sure if you know of a New Brunswick Senator, I believe she is Senator Erminie Cohen. There's quite a program in New Brunswick that has been very effective in moving children in care under the minister into adoption. That might be, Madam Chairman, a topic or a witness we might want to have, because she's quite a keen advocate, I hear, of adoption and has been very successful in New Brunswick. I understand they've gone somewhere from 20 children up to 200 children in one year that they've increased. Anyway, I would just throw it out for a suggestion. But you're aware of that, I'm sure.

[9:45 a.m.]

MS. TYSON: Yes, I think we're very aware of the New Brunswick experience. They have taken upon themselves to improve their adoption system. They have been tremendously successful. We have had our small team working on adoption visit New Brunswick to look at their practices, and they have met with Senator Cohen. She leads a private foundation which promotes domestic adoption. So, very much through her efforts and her dedication, New Brunswick has been able to attract private dollars to help promote adoptions. They have, as you indicated, Mr. Parent, tremendously increased the number of children being adopted. So it's a success story that we have looked to and that we hope to benefit from and learn from their model.

MR. PARENT: Thank you, I would love to hear more about it as it progresses, because it sounds like a win-win for everybody and certainly would help with the rising number of children seeking foster care. I was going to go back, because in the session when we discussed it before, someone mentioned the whole issue of prevention, and that may be outside the mandate of what you're talking about but it seems to me that perhaps at times, and I've seen this with the health system, we tend to get focused so much on trying to deal with the acute problems - we all do that in our jobs, the day-to-day sort of things - that the long-term, underlying prevention issues don't get addressed as well as they should. So I'm just wondering if you've been doing any work in that regard as well?

MS. WOOD: Yes, and actually I read the Hansard where the discussion was prevention. I have a slide to just explain. Prevention is occurring and it's critical. I think that you can prevent child abuse and neglect. There's no question that early intervention and prevention is helpful. It doesn't necessarily take place through child welfare agencies, however, but it does take place within Family and Children's Services. Family and Children's Services,

which is part of the group - child welfare is a component of Family and Children's Services - that actually spends almost \$5 million on prevention.

These prevention initiatives are definitely focused on parenting skills and preventing child abuse. There are multiple centres up, trying to map it. I have a complex slide. So, when I say 11 family resource centres, actually in the western region there are many more sites than actual centres. So you will find a prevention presence in almost every community. If I could just show - it doesn't occur in child welfare, because I think of child welfare in many ways, Family and Children's Services programs. It's like the emergency department. The emergency department doesn't do heart health, but you know you don't just keep dealing with heart attacks, somebody has to get out there and deal with the other aspects.

So child welfare is part of this section, which I'm responsible for, but we have the whole Early Childhood Development Community Outreach Services and Early Childhood Development Initiatives. We know that those are critical for child abuse. In fact one of the things that agencies would do would be refer parents to some of those programs. We work together, but child welfare itself is more like the emergency room than the health promotion.

MR. PARENT: One last question. I'm glad to hear that, because we have an excellent program in Kentville, the Family Resource Centre in the Kentville Baptist Church, which is doing some excellent work. These pay off in the long run. You talked about the PRIDE Program, could you elaborate on that a little bit because it's somewhat new to me?

MS. WOOD: I will go as far as I can go, and I have an expert sitting behind me. PRIDE stands for Parent Resources for Information, Development and Education. The program itself is a program that was undertaken in the whole Atlantic region, so other Atlantic Provinces have also undertaken it. Again, when you made reference to the crisis, it is somewhat misnamed, it is misnamed, but I think there has been a crisis, not in terms of placements for children, but in how people feel when they are suddenly confronted with a child that's very disturbed, they don't know what to do, they feel like they are in crisis. That is where you get some of that wording coming in. I think people feel truly overwhelmed with what do I do.

The whole focus of PRIDE is the professionalization of foster parents to recognize that you don't drop them off with the child and say I will come back and see you in a few months. You actually have to have them actively involved, receive training in terms of how to take care of children. Actively involve them in the treatment team. Part of underlying PRIDE are the values that go with making social workers, frankly, more inclusive of foster parents. Have them participate in the planning for children, be part of the process. It's an enhancement to how we deliver foster parents that also has some expectations on social workers as well, and agencies as a whole.

I think that we are realizing that when we bring everyone in the room together, that feeling of I don't know what to do starts to go down and you start to have planned interventions with children, rather than a reactive basis. The emphasis is definitely on training, on standardized policies, and on inclusion.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Thank you. Bill?

MR. WILLIAM LANGILLE: Actually thank you for your presentation, it was in depth, and I know a couple of you people personally and I know that you are doing an excellent job. I just want to go back to I believe it was Monday night. I was watching ATV News, and I believe you were on ATV News with another lady, on this subject.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: I didn't see that but I was interviewed, yes.

MR. LANGILLE: What I took from that was an entirely different story from what I'm hearing today here. I am saying that, and first of all, I found it unprecedented to go on television prior to holding a committee meeting, and I took from that was it was in a real crisis, and now, that the word crisis that Mr. Parent said is inflammatory, certainly there are concerns out there, but a crisis is an emergency to me.

I just had to say that, and I would like to see that clip again from ATV. The ratio of homes have been certainly been explained here and the amount of monies although there wouldn't be enough but it certainly has increased. When the Liberals were in power, and also when we're in power, it has increased, the monies. I believe it is just under \$50 million now, is that correct?

MS. WOOD: For the children's maintenance.

MR. LANGILLE: That is all I have to say about that. As a committee member I was confused, on Monday, and now I am hearing a different side. Also, Ms. Wilson, I believe you were on the ATV News.

MS. JILL WILSON-KINGSTON: Yes, I was.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Well, Mr. Langille, if you want to wait a few minutes when it is my turn to ask questions you will understand where I am coming from on this issue.

MR. LANGILLE: And I will do that, Madam Chairman. That is all I have to say about that.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Russell.

MR. RUSSELL MACKINNON: I think it's in fairness to yourself and to the member for Colchester North, everyone is entitled to their own opinion, so long as it's not something

being referred to as chairperson of the committee, I think you're entitled to your own opinion. I have a few short snappers. With regards to some comments that were made, I will follow up what my colleague from Colchester North has just raised, that is the rate that is being paid to foster parents. On Page 15 of the Hansard, from the meeting with the Foster Parents Federation, they indicated that there were being paid less than 50 per cent of what is recommended nationally, and this in part, is a major contributing factor to the crisis situation that they have put forth, because they believe, and it's Ms. William's own words, who indicated it, it's not the member for Cape Breton West, or the chairperson, or anyone else who said it was a crisis, it was the Foster Parents Federation who said it was a crisis, so we have to accept from the stakeholders who were involved in the process, that they know what they're talking about, and they say, a large part of it is because of a lack of funding. How do you respond to that?

MS. TYSON: Thank you, for the opportunity to comment on that. Nova Scotia in terms of maintenance, pays \$713 per month for children, ages one to nine and \$873 . . .

MR. MACKINNON: Yes, we know what the rates are.

MS. TYSON: That is higher than many provinces, higher for example than, British Columbia, higher than New Brunswick, higher than Newfoundland, higher than Manitoba, higher than Saskatchewan, higher than P.E.I., except at the very top end, so our rates are comparable across the country to other provinces. In addition, the Director of Child Welfare has indicated that we pay an additional amount for trained foster parents, and we are also comparable in those rates that we are now paying for trained parents, so I feel that we are doing very well in comparison, we are certainly on the high side and above average in terms of the maintenance rates, and we are comparable in terms of the trained rates, and in terms of our training, we are ahead of every other province. We have the top training program in the country and top-trained foster parents, so overall, I think, we are not doing badly.

MR. MACKINNON: Madam Chairman, with all due respect, the number of foster children in this province are growing, the number of foster families is decreasing. There seems to be an extreme concern expressed by the Foster Parents Federation, that they are in a crisis situation, and the deputy minister is here today putting the blinders on, saying that everything is pretty good, we're doing great. Now why are the front-line workers, the families who are involved looking after children, in this province, saying there's a crisis and the department is saying no, everything is okay - it doesn't add up.

MS. TYSON: I think we can always do more, in every area, every program that we have in the department, but in this particular area, we've made, as you have heard, we've made considerable strides and we are doing very well. I think the number of foster families is actually increasing.

MR. MACKINNON: With all due respect, Madam Chairman, the minister's own department has indicated the number of foster families has decreased.

MS. TYSON: Some people are leaving. (Interruption)

MR. MACKINNON: I heard very clearly what's in Hansard here, as well, from the stakeholders.

[10:00 a.m.]

MS. TYSON: If I could, perhaps, try and clarify. Certainly people are leaving the system, but people are coming into the system also, and the overall number of families is increasing.

MS. WOOD: What we were showing, just to clarify, this was the number of open - yes, people have been leaving. This is the number of foster homes closed, and the closure represents a demographics in all of human services, and it's across North America, it's not something unique to Nova Scotia. We had very large numbers of people leaving foster care. Some of that is age and retirement related. The important thing on this slide is that, beginning with interventions back in 1998-2000, with the PRIDE Program, et cetera, we see that the number being closed is declining, the number that is open, active and accepting placements is increasing. So, you do see a trend that, while there is need for improvement, you see that the trend is actually going in the right direction.

MR. MACKINNON: Madam Chairman, why would the Foster Parents Federation come here and say there are less families today than there were several years ago? I mean they wouldn't come here and lie; I'm sure they wouldn't.

MS. TYSON: Oh, no. They may be looking at the number leaving; they may not be looking at the number coming in.

MR. MACKINNON: We can play with statistics and charts all we want, but the reality is, if there is a crisis, there is a crisis.

MS. WOOD: I don't know the reason for their comment, but they may be looking at the number of foster families leaving the system; they may not be looking at the number coming in. They may not be aware of the total number coming in. They would not have as accurate statistics because every foster family must be approved by the department and the department keeps a complete and accurate list of all foster families. They would not necessarily have that information.

MR. MACKINNON: Two short snappers - I will wrap them into one.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Perhaps one, and then you could save the other for second round.

MR. MACKINNON: Sure. I'm just getting warmed up, Madam Chairman. (Interruptions) Well, coming from members who didn't even know what their own government was doing, I take that with a grain of salt.

On Page 17 of that presentation of January 29th, I asked the question of how many children in the last year were placed in hotels or motels by the department. Can you give us that information?

MS. WOOD: I know of none.

MR. MACKINNON: Okay, because they didn't seem to know and they felt at one point that in some areas . . .

MS. WOOD: I think what Ms. Williams said is she had none, she didn't know of any.

MR. MACKINNON: No, that's right, but she thought that they had been kept in an apartment-like environment with staff from the department for a period of time. Is that the custom, that staff members within the department would stay with foster children for an extended period of time?

MS. WOOD: She was talking about her own staff. I actually followed up on that. The Department of Community Services also has housing as one of its programs and the central region has made use of an apartment there on occasion where they have put staff in. The reason for that - and I asked her about the circumstances for the little boy, and again it was a very, very terrible abuse situation and, even though he was very young, he was struggling with severe behavioural issues. It really exceeded what a foster family could manage and they put 24-hour staff around him until they were able to get him into the IWK, which is what happened, but I know of no children in hotels.

MR. GORDON GOSSE: Madam Chairman, an interesting topic this morning, thank you for coming in.

I have a number of questions, but I will have to be short I guess. Every year a committee is set up through the Children and Family Services Act to look into legislation concerning the protection of children. It is the minister's advisory committee and a report is done for the minister's office. Was such a committee put in place in 2003, and is there a report to the minister's office? Were there any recommendations made to the minister's office and, if so, were any of those recommendations implemented?

MS. TYSON: There is not a committee in place now. There has been a committee in the past. On at least two occasions they have submitted reports and the department has been studying the reports, looking at the reports. There seems to be nothing new to be gained from having another report right at this point, although we are looking at what we can do to implement and to move along the reports that have been made in the past. We're studying that now.

MR. GOSSE: So none of those recommendations were implemented at all from those reports?

MS. TYSON: I can't say none of them.

MS. WOOD: The most recent report was actually - they considered issues around adoption disclosure and a number of those recommendations were implemented.

MR. GOSSE: Okay. A short one I guess. You said \$713 for a child from zero to nine, does that include the National Child Tax Benefit in that amount, the child tax credit?

MS. WOOD: It's made up of the board rate, which is given directly to foster parents, and then based on monthly reimbursables, like clothing, school supplies, those kinds of things, it all adds up to the actual monies that are given. It is what it is.

MR. GOSSE: The child tax credit is in there or not, yes or no, in that \$713?

MS. TYSON: It's a separate amount.

MR. GOSSE: On top of that. You're saying the \$713 per month for a child in foster care, is the child tax credit on top of \$713?

MS. TYSON: Oh, do you mean what they receive?

MR. GOSSE: Yes.

MS. TYSON: No. No, they would not.

MR. GOSSE: They would not. That's included then, the child tax credit. Okay, that's very good, thank you.

Also, I've known foster parents for many, many years in my community in Cape Breton. For 17 years - there has been a family down the road from me and is this possible that there's never been a raise in the clothing allowance money for children in foster care? The way everything has gone with HST and children's clothing - has there ever been a raise for the clothing allowance for foster families recently?

MS. WOOD: I can't say recently, but certainly in 17 years.

MR. GOSSE: I have a letter here from a foster family in my community and that's what it said. They were talking about the PRIDE program, the importance of building a strong sense of self worth, they're talking about how that builds up the foster parents. This one foster parent said to me, why train foster parents to do a job and not follow through with the support they need to meet the basic needs of a child? Any normal child - she has marked that here, I'm just going by what she says - the PRIDE program is training them for self respect and self worth to help the children, but it's saying to them that the financial support is not there for these families. This is what I get from the foster families that I speak to in Cape Breton.

MS. TYSON: The rates have not increased recently, which I believe has been brought to the department's attention by the federation. They have requested increases in rates. So, the rates haven't been increased recently, but the rate is as I indicated. It is higher than many provinces so we are at least comparable to other provinces. It includes direct costs of raising the child, including diapers, formula, dental, glasses, clothing, food, phone contact and those kinds of things. So it is a rate that has been set but you are correct - I don't think it goes back as far as 17 years, but it has not been raised in recent years.

MS. WOOD: Could I just respond to that, just to add something. We're in an area where I think we do have to make some improvement. It concerned me. The minister recently met with the board of the federation and I was able to accompany him. They were talking there about rates and when I responded with what the rates are, a number around the table said that they didn't actually ask for reimbursement for this or for this - they were going in their own pocket. They felt uncomfortable asking or they weren't aware that's how much the clothing allowance was, that sort of thing. So it did leave us with a task to go away and say, how do we make sure that all foster parents are aware of what all the reimbursables are and to make sure that those policies are applied fairly and evenly across the province. Agencies are the ones that are actually distributing the money and I felt concerned to hear a number of them say that they were unaware of what some of those were. I think there's something we need to do there.

MR. GOSSE: I'm glad to hear you say that. Thank you very much. Do I have time for one more tiny one?

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Can you save it for the second round?

MR. GOSSE: I guess so. Thank you very much, Madam Chairman.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Gary.

MR. GARY HINES: Thank you for being here today. I would just like to make note that the comments that we had from the last group, Ms. Williams in particular, were anecdotal information that we received. We didn't receive charts so to compare anecdotal information

and try to justify it against a presentation of charts that are obviously prepared would be wrong. I also think it's counterproductive for you to be here today to debate the interpretation of the word crisis. When in your opening statement you indicated that you were not in crisis and you presented evidence to the good for that. Anyway, I'm going to make those comments but then I'm going to move to a comment regarding Mr. Sampson's first questions regarding how you determine in your follow up, your back up, in terms of recognizing that the children are not being abused in the home?

Before I even became an elected official, I had some dealings with your office, Ms. Wood, and I will tell you that when we started out with a conversation, I was not on your side. But, when I saw the depth that you went to to convince me and others that were involved that this individual was not perhaps a good foster home individual, then I have great faith in you as a leader and I think if that goes down through the chain, then Mr. Sampson can feel better about that presently today we are getting better scrutiny of the system. I only wanted to make those comments, I don't have a question.

MS. TYSON: I want to thank you on behalf of staff for making that comment, thank you very much.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: I'm going to ask the vice-chairman to take over the Chair. I want to ask my questions.

[10:10 a.m. Mr. Mark Parent took the Chair.]

MR. CHAIRMAN: We've gone through a full round of first questions except for yourself.

The member for Dartmouth South-Portland Valley.

MS. MARILYN MORE: I really appreciate this opportunity to ask you some questions and I have to say I do share some of the frustration of my colleagues in that I feel caught between two realities - the reality I'm hearing from the front-line workers and the foster parents and the children and youth in care and what I'm hearing from you today. So if you can do anything to help clarify that situation, I would really appreciate it.

The youth in care who met with us as part of the youth and care newsletter last fall were telling the stories of how some of their calls to their caseworkers went unanswered for up to a couple of weeks, but they were quick to point out they understood why because the caseloads were so heavy. I've heard directly from caseworkers who say that they're so busy dealing with crises that they haven't time to do what they call their social work - the counselling, the intervention, the preventive work that they would prefer to be doing.

We've heard from foster parents that, again, you've talked about this, who say the rates are too low. They have insurance concerns because they're considered high risk and this is impacting on their family and work situations, that there isn't enough support from their caseworkers because of the heavy caseloads. They're very concerned about the category of youth beyond age 16. They feel that between 16 and 21 a lot of them just fall between the cracks and that there is a lack of in-home support for foster situations. I've heard from some of the agencies that there aren't enough appropriate placements. The parents are saying that they don't feel that there is enough sort of long-term plans or intervention and again they talk about the lack of in-home support. Some of them say that, you know, if we had more in-home supports, perhaps our child wouldn't have been placed in the care of the minister.

So if people are approaching me, seeking me out and telling me these things, how does that relate to the excellent system that you are describing? I'm really lost here.

MS. TYSON: I will make a couple of comments and then ask Vicki Wood to add specifics. I indicated that there is always more that we can do. We do have a very good system. We've made great strides over the past few years and we're very proud of that, but there's always more we can do. One of those areas is in the area of the caseloads and what I have learned is that the caseloads are not consistent across the province. They are quite a bit heavier here in metro than they are in some of the more rural areas so that although I believe we need to look at the caseloads in metro, in some of the rural areas I believe they are quite low. So there's an inconsistency that we need to take a look at and try to figure out how to deal with. So that's one area that we need to take a look at.

Another area that we've been working on and we've made some progress, but we're not fully there yet, is in terms of insurance. So we have made some strides in terms of insurance. Insurance seems to be an issue which is problematic in many areas. We have made some gains and some improvements in insurance and we are continuing at this time to work on that and we hope to improve that situation more fully over the coming months. With those comments, recognizing that there are areas that we need to continue to work on and in fact will continue to work on the entire program, that those are areas that we need to look at specifically.

MS. MORE: Can I follow up on caseloads. Do you actually have a standard as to the range?

MS. TYSON: No, we don't have a standard as in the child welfare, but we are attempting to try to get an idea of what is manageable, what kind of cases are manageable, and we do understand that the caseloads are fairly heavy here in metro. That is one area that we understand that we need to address and we will be looking at that.

MS. MORE: Okay, because it's been suggested it's been up to 62, and I guess 30 is probably a more ideal range?

[10:15 a.m.]

MS. TYSON: I hadn't heard numbers that high, I had heard number . . .

MS. MORE: That was mentioned at our meeting with the Children's Aid Society and the Foster Parents Federation.

MS. TYSON: The number that I had heard was in the 40s, 40 to 45, but we will look into that and we do recognize that whether it's 40, 45, or 60, it is high in metro. In some areas, I understand, it is as low as seven or nine, so there's quite a difference there, as you point out, that needs to be addressed, and we do need to work on that.

MS. MORE: What about the issue of in-home supports. It's been suggested that there were many cuts to that particular support program, back in the early 1990s and that they haven't been brought back in?

MS. WOOD: Yeah, I don't know who made those comments, but I would like to respond and say that, child welfare's values, philosophy, whole orientation, is to try and support parents and children at home, if at all possible. So, we talked about the rise and the costs were child and care maintenance, I could show you the same in terms of the services for homes. I will just explain by numbers and maybe that would help. We've served 13,000 children, probably 14,000, this last year, of those, only 750 were new cases we brought before the court, so the vast majority of the volume is actually at home. So, it goes like this, there's a huge emphasis, not only that, there is a strong court bias, that we support families at home, and I would say that sometimes we leave children in situations where perhaps we shouldn't, because there's such a strong court bias, but that's my personal opinion.

The kinds of things that we would offer at home are, parenting skills for parents practical. In addition to social workers in our agencies, we have family support workers, they're called, and they would do anything from, if you think about the kind of presenting problems, if you had a young mother, no family around her, she might need practical assistance on everything from how to get a job, budgeting, how to cook nutritious meals for her family. They would do that whole range as well as, what's appropriate discipline, what are the stages of development for children, how do you prepare children for school, those kinds of things, so they do the whole range of things. In addition, to that, the kinds of services we would have would be more to professional level, that's sort of a para-profession, professional counseling and support. A range of services that go with the parents, then for the children, you'd have the same comparable situation.

MS. MORE: So is there such a thing as respite services for those looking after very high needs children?

MS. WOOD: Your talking about children in foster care or parents at home.

MS. MORE: Yes, foster care.

MS. WOOD: We do have respite care, but we don't have a formalized respite system as some provinces do and it's something we need to do. We do have ways and means of providing respite care and some foster parents, specifically, that's what they offer is respite care, but the respite system is better developed in some of the other provinces. When I say we have a building block approach to improving foster care, that's definitely one of our goals.

MS. MORE: Could I just ask one more question? You mention in the beginning of the meeting that foster care is just one in a continuum of placement options that the department uses, and I would assume it would be sort of the high-end of the preferred option?

MS. WOOD: It's not the high-end from the point of view of intensity of involvement because you just have two parents, but you would want it for every child..

MS. MORE: For security.

MS. WOOD: Yes, if you could, you would want children to be in a family environment. There are some children that can't thrive in that kind of environment.

MS. MORE: No, I understand that. I guess my question is, are there pressures on the other options that are creating situations where more high-needs children have to be placed in foster care, perhaps, without appropriate supports? You have the open foster homes but I'm wondering what the rate of the residential services for the same group of children is?

MS. WOOD: It's not different at all, it's very similar to what has happened in foster care. The vacancies are there, there are vacancies in all of our programs, the placements exist. The concern has been that group home staff have been challenged to know how to deal with spikes in behaviour. The kids in residential programs tend to be older, so what you will have - one of the reasons we have had vacancies - is instead of managing and knowing how to manage behaviour clinically, they discharge the youth, and the youth would go from placement to placement. That is why our interventions have been training interventions, rather than open more spaces. We have brought in whole series of residential standards for children and youth, plus we've completed a whole training program for the residential programs.

My own belief is that secure care was a critical missing component because now, when young people go through that spike and really can't be managed in that kind of a setting, they're self-harming. Some of them cut themselves, do all kinds of things that frighten staff - you know, they're alarmed - and rather than discharging them, if they can have a period of treatment in secure care and go right back to where they came from, you are providing that stability and continuity. You are saying look, this is your home, and if you need treatment, we will provide the treatment and then you go right back there. To me, this is a very important piece that we've

put in place because now you won't have the discharges, you will have better continuity. Secure care is also the backup for foster care.

MR. CHAIRMAN: I'm quite happy, if you would like to continue on, if the committee agrees with your follow-up now, so that you could then resume the Chair and not have to - so you could treat this as your follow-up if you don't mind. We know you're passionate and care so we don't want to stop that in any way, Marilyn, but we want to be fair. Is the committee in agreement that we allow Marilyn to skip over the four other presenters? So your second set of questions.

MS. TYSON: I would just like to add, Ms. More, that when you say is foster care the preferred option, adoption is the preferred option for children who can't live at home with their families; that's the preferred option for all of those that it's possible for adoption. As I indicated earlier, there are many needs to improve that system which we are working on and I'm very hopeful that over the next year we will be able to make significant strides there, because we do have challenges in that system. For all of the children who come into the permanent care of the minister, if we can promote adoptions, so that they grow up in their own homes with their own families, that's preferable to anything else.

MS. MORE: I just wanted to follow up on a concern that I find quite alarming, that perhaps the small options homes and the group homes have tended in the past, when unable to deal with acting-out behaviour, have just put the child - or probably more youth at that age - practically out on the street. Are you keeping any records to show how many transfers are now happening to the Wood Street Centre to prevent that situation, or at least to lessen it?

MS. WOOD: Well we will, it's early along. It's too early for me to say that I see a trend. Our expectation is that the young person return to the place from which they came, and they could come from anywhere within the child welfare system, but yes, we definitely will be tracking it and it's one of our outcomes that we're looking for.

MS. MORE: I just want to finish up by asking some questions about the older youth. As I understand it, if they are in permanent care of the minister, they can stay in the foster care situation until they're - I think it's 19 or 21 if they're actually in an educational setting. But children and youth who are not in permanent care or in temporary care actually leave the system at the age of 16.

MS. WOOD: No, children in temporary care can remain in temporary care as well. How you get into the care of the minister is through Section 22 (2); that's one of the key places. Where the 16 comes in, is that a child defined under the legislation is a child under the age of 16. You don't enter the system past that age, for your first entry. If you are already there you can continue to stay either in permanent or in temporary, but you can't come in fresh past that age.

MS. MORE: Well it's been suggested to me that a number of youth around the age of 16, 17 who have probably been in temporary care of the minister are now leaving the more secure, safe, stable situations and are taking up placements in shelters. This has caused some concern among those workers, so where is the problem there? Do we need to extend the age of 16, so that there is a little more legal control in order to continue the support services that children or youth at that age require, in some cases?

MS. WOOD: I think certainly the research would indicate that children 16, 17, 18, can also be victims of abuse and neglect. I would have to say yes. Five provinces have legislation that goes beyond the age of 16; the others stop there, and we are in that group. There is another thing buried in what you have said. Even when we are the parent, we can't make teenagers do certain things, and that's a concern.

I've walked up and down Spring Garden Road and gotten upset. Sometimes I will see the same kid out there day after day after day. You go out and if you think it's getting cold, why aren't you in school? I tell them look, I'm a social worker. I don't scare them away by saying who I am, just that I'm in social work, do you know there are services? I don't want to live in a group home, I don't want this, I don't want that, my boyfriend loves me. It's very upsetting, and it's alarming, and I don't have a solution for that.

We don't ask people to leave temporary care because they have turned that age. We don't withdraw the services, what happens unfortunately, is that a certain percentage of kids refuse to accept them. We have had our hands tied until fairly recently, but with secure care we actually now are allowed to impose. We had no means of doing that and we felt the same helplessness that a parent might.

MR. PARENT: I'm getting some glances from various members, not just my caucus, other caucuses. Thank you very much for your questions and your responses. The member for Dartmouth North, and I will then relinquish the Chair.

[10:28 a.m. Ms. Marilyn More resumed the Chair.]

MR. PYE: First of all I want to say that the issue that I really want to bring to your attention was touched on by the chairman of the committee, and that was the insurance. I think that you have talked about working towards helping persons with foster children gain the kind of insurance that is needed. I don't think that's a real issue, now that you are really working on it, and you will be working with the societies and the agencies across the province.

The concern that I have, Madam Chairman, is one that I was hoping that we as members of this committee would be enlightened on, and that's the fact of what happens when a child enters the care of the minister. I mean when a child first comes in, where does that child go? First of all the most important thing, as you have indicated, would be to keep the child in the

family setting, the family environment. That's the single most important thing; obviously the courts want that as well. Those are the stresses that they place on you.

I thought that you might give us an example of what happens when a child actually comes into the care of the minister - if that child has a behavioural problem, they go to the Wood Street Centre in Truro, if there is a space available, or located to a group home and so on, on the particular needs of the child - and would have walked us through that sort of a process, so that we all would have been enlightened as to what the department does with respect to the child, once the child comes in and what programs and services follow the child through that sort of thing. That is unfortunate because we don't have enough time to do that today, and I would really liked to have seen a process whereby that would have enlightened us as committee members on how the department functions.

[10:30 a.m.]

MS. WOOD: If I could just make a brief comment - there isn't one process. You have to make that plan based on the child. It isn't like in school, Grade 1, then Grade 2, then Grade 3. It depends on the age of the child, the needs of the children and it would differ based on each child.

MR. PYE: Excuse me, yes, we know that it would differ, but, for example, you would say this child, based on this particular need, goes through this avenue of the Department of Community Services up to the point whereby there's an adoption or a foster child. Rather they go into residential care for x number of days, they go into a group home for x number of days or what the process is up until the time that they're either adopted or put to foster care or sent back to their home environment.

MS. WOOD: They may actually enter any of those at the very beginning is what I meant to say. Your first place could be a residential program, your very first place could be foster care or your very first place could be a prospective adoptive home. It isn't progressive in that sense.

MR. PYE: I just wanted to make one final comment with respect to the title of crisis situation. It definitely isn't definition crisis. Crisis can mean a whole lot of things to a whole lot of people. When the Department of Community Services does a presentation to me that doesn't mean that I don't believe that there is still a crisis out there because as a member of this committee, I have to weigh the balance of the information that is presented to me. That information that is presented to me, although I was not here, and what I've read through the Hansard, indicated to me quite clearly that this was a crisis situation. Whether it was or not, it indicated quite clearly. As you can see through the comments, it would be quite clear when in fact there are not adequate rates given to foster parents, when in fact there's an insurance issue problem, when there's a whole host of issues that come down with respect to that. That, to me,

signifies crisis whether we want to believe it or not. I just wanted to let you know I appreciate your presentation and unfortunately was not here when the presentation from the Children's Aid Society was made. However, I want you to know that I still believe that there's some very serious issues out there and I think the department in its wisdom knows that and is prepared to address some of those things.

MADAME CHAIRMAN: Thank you. Russell, Gordie and Gerald.

MR. LANGILLE: If I may, I'll give my time to Mr. MacKinnon, as he seems to need it.

MR. MACKINNON: I'm overwhelmed. I don't know how to respond to that. When Ms. Thibault was here back on January 29th, she indicated that there were 1,967 children in foster care. Then in 2002-03 there were 2,154 children in care. She went on to indicate, "For the federation, we had a clawback in our operational budget, not this past fiscal year but the year before, and it was about \$90,000. We have maintained about the same budget for the last two years but it is certainly not going to increase."

A little further on Ms. Thibault answered a question, the question being, you've had a reduction in your budget for education and the training component. Ms. Thibault, yes. So my question to the deputy minister is, given your glowing report, why does this disparity of reasoning exist between the department and the Foster Parents Federation of Nova Scotia?

MS. TYSON: Can I say that there was no clawback of an operational budget. Money is provided on an annual basis for operating and for training and for support services and for the PRIDE program. In 2002-03, for example, there was more money provided than was needed for training and for operating. The department doesn't run surpluses in agencies - they provide what the agencies need in order to operate and do the work. So there was money left over at the end of that year and in 2003-04 even more money was provided and there was money left over. So they had, in other words, all the money they needed to do the work that we have contracted them to do.

MR. MACKINNON: Madam Chairman, on Page 20 of that same presentation, Ms. Williams acknowledged that there were 278 fewer foster homes in Nova Scotia. That seems to defy the presentation that you've made. Why is there a disparity in the figures?

MS. WOOD: My answer to that would be that these are open, active foster homes, and foster homes that are actually providing placements. In Nova Scotia, many people remained part of the foster parent system, network, et cetera, but had reached an age or other circumstances where they weren't actually accepting new placements. When I worked with Ms. Williams at the Children's Aid Society of Halifax, we would ask, how many foster homes do we have, and then the next thing we would say is, okay, but then how many do we really have.

That was at a time when agencies themselves had clusters of foster homes. There wasn't any sort of overall system for managing them.

The department made some changes in structure, which has brought all the foster parents together in one system. As you have indicated, we have had closures of foster homes here, and she could be referring to some of those individuals who are leaving. So we did have people leaving, and there are various reasons why they might be leaving, but the demographics and age being a significant portion of it. We have people who raised whole generations of children, several generations of children, and they're just not going to do that anymore.

So to just make reference to the number of foster parents leaving, but not making reference to the open, active homes providing placements is only half of the picture. I would say that she was probably giving you an agency perspective and part of the picture.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Could you just clarify, though? Does that count include the families who are looking after other family members in a foster care situation who are not open to taking in additional placements?

MS. WOOD: Yes.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Do you know what percentage would be in that situation?

MS. WOOD: I have it in my notes. The majority is not kinship care.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Okay. That's good to know.

MS. WOOD: Yes, the majority is not, but we treat them all as foster parents and they have the same . . .

MADAM CHAIRMAN: But if you took those off, might that bring the number down to explain the discrepancy in it . . .

MS. WOOD: No, that should have been included in her figures as well, I would say. We don't not treat people as foster parents if they're child-specific - a relative or neighbour or someone who knows the child, we don't treat them differently in terms of their entitlement.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Sorry Russell, I just thought that might be relevant.

MR. MACKINNON: Simply put, the question being, have you or anyone in the department sat down with the Foster Parents Federation since their presentation to discuss this disparity or diversity of opinions on some rather critical issues?

MS. WOOD: Well, diversity of opinion, I wouldn't want to question, but in terms of the numbers, we did . . .

MR. MACKINNON: Well, have you sat down with them? Have you sat down with this organization since their presentation?

MS. WOOD: The Minister of Community Services, myself, and Joe Wilson met with the federation board and its professional staff . . .

MR. MACKINNON: To address the concerns that were in their presentation?

MS. WOOD: Those and any other concerns that they may have. We had a two- or three-hour meeting.

MR. MACKINNON: And are they satisfied?

MS. WOOD: Well, I couldn't speak for them, but I would say it was a very good meeting, yes.

MR. MACKINNON: My next question is, how many children are on a waiting list to go into foster homes?

MS. WOOD: I don't know of any children on a waiting list to go into a foster home. That's not . . .

MR. MACKINNON: Well, you need more foster homes, correct?

MS. WOOD: I would like to correct . . .

MR. MACKINNON: If you don't need more foster homes, then there wouldn't be a waiting list, and if there's no waiting list you don't need more foster homes.

MS. WOOD: It's a dynamic situation. Children come in every day and children go out every day. We definitely would like to have more foster homes. We're putting a major effort . . .

MR. MACKINNON: So there must be a waiting list.

MS. WOOD: No, because if the child needs to come into care, then we would need to take them into care. The minister can't leave them in an unsafe situation.

MR. MACKINNON: How many children are in the minister's care who can't be placed in foster homes because there isn't a foster home to put them in?

MS. WOOD: I can't give you any number associated with that.

MR. MACKINNON: Will you undertake to provide that information to the committee?

MS. WOOD: No, because it's not available. That's not how we make decisions. It's not a waiting list, like what you're describing, so that information wouldn't be available. The agency staff who are responsible for the children develop plans for the children and put those plans in place.

MR. MACKINNON: Then how do you know you need more foster homes if you don't know?

MS. WOOD: Well, it would lessen the number of children in a home. You would be able to have more planned respite.

MR. MACKINNON: So you would split the children of one family up and send them to different homes?

MS. WOOD: No, we never want to split children up in families. You try not to do that. It can happen but our intention is to always keep siblings together.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: I'm the last person who should suggest you stop asking questions, but we do have three more.

MR. MACKINNON: I would like to thank the member for Colchester North.

MR. LANGILLE: You're welcome. I found your first round very interesting.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: We have three more speakers and then we want to leave time for closing remarks from the deputy minister and we do have some committee business to do. So, Mr. Gosse, you're next.

MR. GOSSE: Madam Chairman, my next question is, they have a qualified trained child protection mediation here in Halifax and there is none in Cape Breton. It can only be accessed through Halifax, the trained mediator would have to travel from Halifax to Cape Breton?

MS. WOOD: I'm not familiar with what you're referring to. Is what you're talking about an alternative to court?

MR. GOSSE: Yes, in a court case. Well, maybe I will put it this way. We don't have child advocacy here in the Province of Nova Scotia, the deputy minister, and we have said the Ombudsman is the one who's responsible for that. Are there any future endeavours to actually look at getting a child advocate in the Province of Nova Scotia? I think Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Quebec and Newfoundland now have that in place. Has the minister or anybody else looked into it?

MS. WOOD: We aren't looking at it right now.

MR. GOSSE: That's all. I just wanted to know if there was anybody looking at it right now.

MS. WOOD: I will just explain. Mediation is something different. It's an alternative to court and there would be a number of trained mediators across the province.

MS. TYSON: I do know that we had, when I was in my former job, we did have great difficulty attracting mediators in Cape Breton, I'm not sure why. We were more actively recruiting there and maybe it's just the population or the number of people interested in that line of work. I do recall that. So it was a bit of a problem in that area.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Mr. Sampson.

MR. GERALD SAMPSON: I want to thank the member for relaying some of my fears with the credibility that he gave to yourself there, Ms. Woods, and my own personal opinion on abuse is, I will coin the phrase, it's planned decadence and it goes maybe further than that, but that's the way I will phrase it. Anyway, you mentioned that there's a difference between rural figures being low and caseloads being high in metro. Now, if you take that on a population basis, that's an automatic assumption because there's less population in the rural areas than the urban areas and we've always had the rural/urban, a bit of conflict there so to speak, but my concern is are the figures low in the rural areas because of lack of services in rural areas?

MS. TYSON: I think I was commenting on that, that's my understanding. In terms of caseload as to how much a social worker can handle, how much work a social worker can handle, they have less of that kind of work, less work in some areas than in other areas. So we need to look at smoothing that out a little more than it is, not that it will ever be perfectly even. It doesn't work that way but in some areas perhaps they could handle a bit more than there is to do or perhaps other alternatives would be one social worker could handle more than one area but in some areas where there is a bit more work than is comfortable for a social worker, we need to try to alleviate that pressure. That's what I was referring to.

MR. GERALD SAMPSON: I would just like to remind the deputy minister that what I've always endeavoured to do is people in the bureaucratic system, to bring them down to Cape Breton. People when they leave Baddeck, they think when they get to Ingonish, they're in Cape Breton North. There's another hour and a half to go before you get down to Bay St. Lawrence. So people do not understand the massive geographics in my riding of Victoria-The Lakes. From Boisdale to Bay St. Lawrence is a four-hour drive and take that into consideration and drive those roads. I mean we're in the process now of breaking tires on the Trans Canada Highway travelling back and forth, so just imagine what the rural roads are like.

So, somebody with an over-case load, or maybe you don't have the facilities to have the reporting in cases of abuse in rural areas, that's what my fear is. That somebody could go unnoticed because of the large geographics and that one person having to travel so much,

they're probably out of their office more than they're in, because they spend a tremendous amount of time. I know home care suffers the same things. It's a tremendous amount of travel from one client to the next as compared to, you can go into an area in Halifax, or any urban area and do a number of clients, whereas, in a rural area, you're in your car as much as you're into the clients home and travel is a real deterrent.

[10:45 a.m.]

MS. TYSON: You're absolutely right, where people have to travel, that takes time and they can't handle as many cases as others who don't have to travel, and that needs to be taken into account as one of the factors, yes.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Mark you get the closing question.

MR. MARK PARENT: Sure I will just pose the question quickly, you mention the adoption program and I'm just wondering if there's any information in writing since you have met with them and obviously have more knowledge of Senator Cohen that perhaps you could provide the committee, because I think that's something that we might want to follow up, at least I want to follow up on it. So is there anything in writing you could provide us or any information?

MS. TYSON: In terms of the New Brunswick system, we can certainly get together some material for this committee and send it along, certainly.

MR. PARENT: Thank you, very much, and thank you for the statistics. I think that's very important that we have accurate statistics and I appreciate that. I know that in the last meeting in the Hansard record, one of my colleagues expressed frustration with Ms. Williams, because it was not fulsome information and that's on Page 14, if anyone wants to reference that, but my question is that no one in danger, no child in danger, is left in their situation then, so that if there's any child in need anywhere in the province, regardless of what's going on in terms of the number of open homes, we always meet that need immediately, right? Is that true?

MS. WOOD: Yes, that's what I was trying to say, we can't, by legislation or ethics, develop a waiting list for children.

MR. PARENT: Saying you stay there for six months because we don't have a - so the moment they're in danger, we've assessed that and we have an option for them?

MS. WOOD: Yes, and we have 24 hours a day/7 days a week presence that covers the province for emergencies.

MR. PARENT: I thought that's what you were trying to say in response to Mr. McKinnon's question, but I wasn't clear on it. Thank you, very much.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Thank you, Ms. Tyson. Would you like to make some closing remarks?

MS. TYSON: Just a couple. I want to again thank the honourable member who complimented Ms. Wood, and to say that Ms. Wood is a very good example of the dedicated staff that we have in the department, in this area in particular, as I have personally seen Ms. Wood go out onto the street looking for a youth that she had heard about, whom might be in need of some help.

I would also like to comment, that on an earlier slide that Ms. Wood presented, she indicated when we started trying to reform the foster care system, that we went out and consulted extensively with foster parents and the federation, and they were very specific as to what they wanted us to address and I think you probably could see from the presentation that we have addressed all of the areas that they asked us to address. Now, I'm not saying everything in the system is perfect, a system can always be improved, and you've heard about a couple of areas that we're seeking to continue to make specific improvements in, and we will continue to address the entire system. It is one system though that we're very pleased and very proud to have made real progress in and progress where it's needed, so I will close with that comment.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: I think you can tell from the questioning that we share your concern for these particular young people. We thank you for the work that you are doing. I'm sure we will have many other discussions on the topic, so may I wish you all the resources you need to continue to improve the system. Thank you very much.

MS. TYSON: We can always use more money.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Yes, I am sure. We're going to do some committee business for the next 10 minutes so if you want to, you may leave now or you may stay, and thank you, again, for coming.

We haven't taken a recess folks, so let's continue on with our agenda. There were a couple of handouts on your desk when you arrived. The second page behind the agenda is an invitation from the Youth in Care newsletter group. What are they calling it? I don't know if it's a launch or whatever, but it's Tuesday, May 11th. Yes?

MR. PARENT: Gordie was away, but I'm sure he'd want to mention that they're also launching one up in Cape Breton, a Youth in Care newsletter. I don't know if you have a date for their launch up there . . .

MR. GOSSE: Well, they're all intertwined now. The Whitney Pier Youth Club now is involved with the Youth in Care network and so we've expanded that for this committee.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Oh, excellent.

MR. PARENT: I just wanted to make you aware of that.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Thank you, I wasn't aware of that.

MR. GOSSE: Yes, the Whitney Pier Youth Club and the executive director and those guys have all gotten together now so now we're going to have a Cape Breton view on that newsletter also.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Okay, so this is a new newsletter that's being launched. An official invitation I think will be coming to the committee members, but this is just to give you a heads-up so you can mark it in your books.

The second item is the memo that I sent out - I realize very late. There had been concern expressed by a couple of members about substitutions during the meeting and the speaking order, the number of questions. So, I just wanted to put down on paper some of my thoughts and just to let you know I was using the old system today.

I'm not sure how many others share these particular concerns and what you want to do about it, but I did want to allow just a few minutes at today's meeting for discussion. Mark?

MR. PARENT: I think today's meeting went very well, so to me I'm in favour of the old system. However, it did get a little bit like musical chairs that one meeting. I would suggest that if we can - and I think Mr. Pye and myself made that motion - we want to have some flexibility but we also have to, if we're going to operate by convention, we also have to have limits. When those limits happen, I think as Chair, you need to rein them in. If that isn't going to happen, then we will have to move to some other system which, personally, I would think would be unfortunate.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: So, is there a reasonable number of substitutions during a meeting per Party or something? I guess Russell you were next and then Jerry.

MR. MACKINNON: My understanding is the substitutions are usually done right up until when the meeting starts. That would be it.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Oh, in this case, we had the . . .

MR. MACKINNON: I missed the last meeting.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: We had the full membership around the table. Critics or people who had a particular crisis on that topic in their constituencies took over the second question from the person representing the Party around the table so they were sort of in meeting substitutions.

MR. MACKINNON: What happened there, they would sit in for the meeting, they would substitute for the meeting. You just can't keep alternating throughout the meeting otherwise you could have the full caucus of all three Parties and they would jam the system to the point of being dysfunctional.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Okay, I'm open to your guidelines on this.

MR. PYE: Madam Chairman, I think that we made it quite clear the other day, Mr. Parent and myself, that should this occur again, in fact, the committee would be apprised of those individuals who were going to be coming forward at the meeting if there was an issue or topic that centered around a critic portfolio and they wanted to come there for the second question. I think it's important not to formalize the Standing Committee on Community Services. I think there needs to be some room for informalities, so that in fact there is this opportunity and it benefits all Parties and all caucuses to have their expertise come to this table from time to time and ask questions, as long as it doesn't go overboard. I think it was only at one meeting since the six years that I've been here, where, in fact, we can say that it might have overstepped the bounds of taking advantage of having other individuals sit in and ask questions.

I think we resolved that, and I really agree with Mr. Parent, the member for Kings North, when he says that we don't want to get into another convention or formal setting of this Standing Committee on Community Services, because it defeats the purpose of asking some very good questions in an informal setting and so on. I really want to make sure that that doesn't happen.

Secondly, I would recommend or suggest that most caucuses are aware of the topic that's going to be discussed at the Community Services meetings. If, in fact, the members who are presently members want to vacate their position to have those critics in, then that's the time to do it, and let the Parties know in advance that there will be people coming.

MR. LANGILLE: Madam Chairman, if I may, I think that once you bend the system, it's going to be bent and it will be bent in the future. It's my understanding that each caucus has three members. If a member can't make a particular meeting, he can ask for another member of that caucus to sit in his place or they can go with two, if that's their wish. However, when the meeting starts, you have your members at the table, and somebody in the gallery, in the back, of a particular Party, whoever the Party may be, should not be able to come in and sit in as they please. That's not the purpose.

I think we should decide now if we're going to allow that or not. You can't say, well, we're not going to really allow it, but we will allow it on certain occasions. It's never been done before, since I've been here. I've never seen it. I wasn't at this last meeting, when it happened. I don't know why it happened. If they want to sit in, you sit out and let them take your place, if they have a concern. That has happened before, which, of course, there's nothing wrong with

that, prior to the meeting starting. If somebody has a reason to sit in, then by all means I would vacate my chair and let that person sit in. Sometimes it pertains to a certain area, like say Cape Breton and so on and not my area. Naturally a person from Cape Breton would sit in. Anyway, that's my feeling on that.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Okay, we don't really have a lot of time. We can either resolve it fairly quickly, or Mark and I and perhaps a representative from the Liberal Party could just form a little subcommittee and bring back a recommendation on some of these issues. Do I have your permission to at least go to 11:05 a.m., just to try to clear up some of these items?

MR. MACKINNON: Madam Chairman, it seems rather simple. My understanding, and I'm only speaking from the five terms that I've been here, if there's going to be a substitute, that substitute can come in at the beginning of the meeting but you can't keep jumping in and out with different members during the course of a meeting.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Russell, I should just tell you that has only happened at two meetings. The first time the Liberals did it and the second time the NDP did it.

MR. MACKINNON: Well, it shouldn't have been allowed with the Liberals or whatever other caucus. It just can't be done. That's my experience and (Interruptions)

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Mark, just quickly, and then Gordie.

MR. PARENT: Just very quickly, I agree with the concern about the substitutions. I'm not sure if I would want to do a hard and fast rule. I guess my frustration has been, and I will put my cards on the table, my hope, ever since I got elected, was that these committee meetings would be less based on conflict and more on inter-Party co-operation. That is a very fine balance and you can't abuse that. So, when you have titles that I think are inflammatory, which we will get to, when you abuse the substitution sort of thing, I get concerned and I think our caucus gets concerned that we're going into a system where we're not really using the committee properly.

So I think that if that's going to happen, then we have to make hard and fast rules. I don't want to make hard and fast rules, because I personally like to see the give-and-take and that sort of informality. If the government needs to be held to account, yes, we're willing to do that as well, but this is not a beat-up-on-the-government sort of meeting. This is trying to fix problems in the system. I think that I've had some concerns with the musical chairs, the hot potato, the inflammatory title sort of thing and if that continues, then I guess I will have to change my opinion and say, okay, we will need rules that no one can substitute, you know, and set time limits. I think it would be unfortunate if we went that way.

MR. PYE: I move we go beyond 11:00 a.m.

[11:00 a.m.]

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Do we do a seconder?

MS. MORA STEVENS (Legislative Committee Coordinator): You don't have to.

MR. PARENT: Can I just finish up?

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Sure.

MR. PARENT: It may well be that one member has a pressing appointment that they have to leave. I would hate that caucus then to have only two members. That would be a case where a substitution would make sense to me but, you know, if we're going to politicize this too much, then we're going to have hard and fast rules that we all adhere to. I would hate to go that way but if that's the way we're going to go, that's the way we're going to have to go.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Gordie, I hate to cut you off but we have several other items. (Interruptions) Could I suggest that, I've heard what you've said loud and clear. Let's go another two or three meetings and perhaps we could all go back to our caucuses and suggest that if they want to ask questions, that it be a full meeting substitution as much as possible and if we feel that that mild caution isn't working, then we can revisit the issue. Would that be okay rather than . . .

MR. LANGILLE: I don't think we have the authority, do we? What about the Public Accounts Committee?

MR. PYE: This isn't the Public Accounts Committee, and this committee does have the authority.

MR. LANGILLE: No, but once we start we're setting a precedent.

MR. MACKINNON: My understanding - and, Mora, you're clerk of the committee, you've been here for many years as well - Madam Chairman, is that the substitutes give notice at the beginning of the meeting and those people who fill in and substitute are designated replacements for that meeting. Without the full approbation of the committee, you can't be jumping in and out because, number one, what it does, it creates an imbalance in the committee irrespective of what caucus, and then one caucus will get all the questions. The whole idea is that each caucus, in this case, generally one-third, one-third, one-third . . .

MADAM CHAIRMAN: No, it never led to more questions for one Party.

MR. MACKINNON: No, no, it's about time as well and dominating the committee, one caucus over the other, and if we did it, we shouldn't have done it I would submit.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: But the reason I'm concerned, whoever raised the point about someone having to leave, wanting to be there and leaving halfway through.

MR. MACKINNON: There has to be some structure and order.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: There should be some flexibility to allow someone to sit in if they give notice.

MR. MACKINNON: If they give notice prior to the beginning of the meeting. (Interruption) Bona fide, yes.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Yes. So as much as possible we will continue with what we were traditionally doing. The substitutes are known beforehand. They sit in for the full meeting but we're not going to be so rigid that we wouldn't consider another situation, but it would be a discussion among the members. Is that okay?

The second issue that was raised is about the speaking order and the number of questions. I have put some of my comments in the memo. Mora has been tracking the time but has never added anything up. So if you are concerned that one Party is having more time than another, we can track it for a couple of meetings just to see if the concern is justified.

MR. LANGILLE: Who raised it?

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Stephen.

MR. LANGILLE: Stephen who?

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Stephen McNeil.

MS. STEVENS: He's not here today.

MR. MACKINNON: Madam Chairman, what I do when I'm chairing the Economic Development Committee, I appropriate an equal amount of time to each member and if one member goes a little over on the first round, then I cut them back a little on the second. So everyone gets an equal amount of time and I record that and I think the members will readily agree that I've been . . .

MADAM CHAIRMAN: If people are concerned about it, we can do a more formal procedure.

MR. LANGILLE: You're the chairman. It's up to you to divide the time.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Yes, and my style has been more open, informal, you know, bouncing back among the Parties because I think we build on each other's questions and it's more of a collective effort rather than trying to always divide things by Party.

MR. GOSSE: Excuse me, I have to leave. I have another urgent appointment.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Thank you, Gordie. I guess I need to know if this is shared by more than one person, if it's a major concern. If it's not, then I would prefer to stay with the approach that we have been using. Gary.

MR. HINES: Madam Chairman, it certainly hasn't been a concern for me. In fact, I think it has been quite cordial with people of different Parties passing back and sharing some time. Stephen might have felt disadvantaged at one particular meeting, and we're all going to sense that at one time or another, I suspect. I think you've been doing a good job with that.

MR. LANGILLE: I agree with that, too. I don't think it's a problem.

MR. PYE: I also appreciate the importance of the chairman bringing it before the committee to discuss it. I think it's important to have that discussed.

MR. GERALD SAMPSON: Musical chairs won't work.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: No, I appreciate that. Just to let you know the date of the all-day forum that we offered to put on for the Transition House Association of Nova Scotia, it's going to be Thursday, June 24th. There will be more details later, and we will have an opportunity to look over and approve a draft agenda, but I just wanted to give you notice that it's set for June 24th.

MR. MACKINNON: We made the offer, but have they responded?

MADAM CHAIRMAN: They're definitely interested. (Interruptions)

MS. STEVENS: That would be an all-day forum. What it's looking like today are presentations from groups in the morning, such as the men's centres, the Avalon Sexual Assault Clinic, the Department of Justice, the RCMP. Those are groups that we haven't heard from before on those issues. (Interruptions) Yes, and then there will be an afternoon panel discussion.

MR. LANGILLE: Did you clear the Red Room, that it's going to be open?

MS. STEVENS: Yes. It's already booked for that day. (Interruptions)

MADAM CHAIRMAN: We will send you the draft agenda by e-mail, so you (Interruptions)

MR. PARENT: Madam Chairman, everyone is leaving. Could I put it on the next agenda then, the issue of the title, because I did ask that it be put on the agenda.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Yes, it is on, plus the letters from the minister need to be formally . . .

MR. PARENT: Perhaps at the next meeting we could deal with those at the start of the meeting and get them off. I have a sense people don't want to stay, that it's time to go.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: I agree. They've already been given a time, is that going to be a problem?

MS. STEVENS: No, it's okay.

MR. PARENT: Or else we can do it at the end of the meeting, but just make sure we leave time for it.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Exactly. I think I would prefer to do it at the end . . .

MR. PARENT: Yes, it's not polite to our guests.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Do I have your permission then to add those to the next agenda, rather than . . .

MR. PYE: Well, Madam Chairman, I just want to make a comment that this is a response from the Minister of Community Services, both responses, and I don't know the month. Later is the time to debate this. I think it's time to put this on the table now and discuss for a few minutes and then finish it and get it over with and send a response back on how we dealt with both letters. The first letter, there's not much to deal with at all. It tells us what the minister has suggested with the transition homes. We can only thank him for the information that he has provided us on that. The second letter I have some issues with.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: When do you want to deal with it?

MR. PARENT: I'm willing to stay and discuss . . .

MR. MACKINNON: We have caucus. (Interruptions)

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Well, if we don't have a quorum, we will have to put it on the next agenda.

Motion to adjourn.

MR. MACKINNON: So moved.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: We are adjourned.

[The committee adjourned at 11:08 a.m.]