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NOVA SCOTIA HOUSE OF ASSEMBLY

STANDING COMMITTEE

ON

COMMUNITY SERVICES

Thursday, September 16, 2004

Committee Room 1

Community Action on Homelessness

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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. Gary Hines was replaced by Mr. Brooke Taylor.]

[Mr. Jerry Pye was replaced by Ms. Michele Raymond.]

In Attendance:

Ms. Mora Stevens

Legislative Committee Coordinator

WITNESSES

Community Action on Homelessness

Ms. Angela Bishop

Community Liaison

Mr. Wayne MacNaughton

Member of the group's Steering Committee



HALIFAX, THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 16, 2004

STANDING COMMITTEE ON COMMUNITY SERVICES

9:00 A.M.

CHAIRMAN
Ms. Marilyn More

MADAM CHAIRMAN: I want to welcome everyone back after the summer break, for the committee anyhow, not for everything else.

Today we are very pleased to have with us two representatives from the Community Action on Homelessness, Angela Bishop and Wayne MacNaughton. Perhaps before we get started, we should do introductions. Mark, would you like to begin?

[The committee members introduced themselves.]

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Mark, on behalf of all the committee and staff, may I congratulate you and Margie. (Applause)

MR. MARK PARENT: Thank you.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: He recently got married.

Angela and Wayne, I understand you are going to start with a presentation and just give us an overview of the situation and the issue and then we will spend most of the rest of the meeting asking questions. We just need perhaps 10 minutes at the end. We have some other business to finish up before the meeting is over at 11:00 a.m.

MS. ANGELA BISHOP: I would like to start by thanking the committee for the opportunity to speak to you today. I attended a session, I think it was back in March, when Marian Tyson and Harold Dillon were here speaking to housing and there seemed to be a lot of discussion around the numbers and the units we were going to have and when they would come to be, et cetera. In some ways I felt that the real point around housing and homelessness was being missed in the discussion.

There are three key points I would like to communicate today. I hope I do it effectively. They are that the challenge of healthy communities is growing. It's not just in issues around housing and homelessness. The second issue is that because of the challenges growing greater day by day that we have an extremely stressed third sector - non-profit, voluntary sector, whatever you would like to refer to it as - and that there is an increased need for greater collaboration and greater support of that sector so that they can get the job done at the grassroots level, the job that they do best and I believe they are well positioned to partner within government to deliver that.

The final point is that in supporting the third sector in their work and, again, not just around housing and homelessness but arts, culture, sports, education, you name it, that we have to have more collaboration and new ways of doing things.

I would like to talk briefly about two numbers that I seem to type into my computer a fair bit and talk about. One is a number from 1999, when the Affordable . . .

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Angela, I think we're running into a problem in terms of picking up your voice. Is there any chance that you could sit?

MS. BISHOP: I'm happy to sit.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Thank you.

MS. BISHOP: The first number represents a finding of the Affordable Housing Association of Nova Scotia way back in 1999, and that was based on 1996 census data, if I recall correctly, and it represented the number of families across Nova Scotia who would be considered at core need, that refers to them being in need of more suitable accommodation, more adequate accommodation or they're facing affordability challenges. The second number is a number that was found through the efforts of HRM in their research around housing and homelessness. Last year, 16,500-plus households in the HRM were reported in that report as being at risk of homelessness.

These numbers are very large and I believe there are three things to note about them. First, because they're based on census data they may include some people who really don't have a housing problem. Maybe they make \$70,000 and choose to pay 42 per cent of their income on rent, however, there's also the possibility that many people are left out of such a count

because we can't always account for the number of people in the household and the adequacy of housing is relied upon as self-reporting. There's also a large number of subsidiary units that we rely upon right across the province. Probably in the end the numbers would be pretty close.

I find that our dialogue around these numbers serves to disengage many people from taking action and encouraging action on the part of government. Many people do not consider themselves - even though they are who we are talking about - being at risk of homelessness. For instance, Mr. and Mrs. Jones have a young daughter, she's single, she has a couple of children, she shows up on the doorstep a couple of times a month because she has no food in the refrigerator. The grandparents are on limited income, but they dress the kids for back-to-school because their daughter can't make ends meet at her minimum wage job. However, there's no way their daughter is at risk of homelessness, they would never allow that to happen, so they don't believe that's who we are talking about when we speak to these numbers in that way.

We need to start talking in a different way, look to all of you to talk to constituents about what these numbers really mean. What they mean is that we do indeed have people who are at risk of absolute homelessness, those without supports, however, what we have are very large numbers of people who are stuck where they're at and have little chance of pursuing that quality of life that I think most of us in this room take for granted and that we hope all Nova Scotians can achieve.

There are two main programs to address housing and homelessness. I know that you're familiar with each of them. The key issue around this to discuss is, first, that the challenge of the dollar-for-dollar match that's a requirement under the Bilateral Housing Agreement, especially with the SCPI initiatives, that there is an ongoing operational need for agencies, that they are very challenged in some cases to achieve. The partnerships can come from other levels of government, they can come from the private sector, although we really have to seriously consider the potential of that contribution, or it can indeed come from private citizens. Such requirements around these programs are very frustrating to community agencies and impact on their capacity to meet established gaps in services and supports in the community.

I did hand out kind of a summary of the monies that have been available over the last four years. In the first round of SCPI, we supported over \$10 million in the community, greater through Nova Scotia, because there are different pockets of money. Our call for proposals closes Friday at noon of this week. We have \$2 million left for a huge problem, and we expect proposals that will amount to over \$10 million.

This is just a summary of the impact of the national homelessness initiative across the country. Those seem to be pretty big numbers, but often we have to step back from that and talk about where the real impact is. Mostly that impact falls on individuals, those who are in a position, at the right place, at the right time, to access the benefits that come from these partnership projects. I hear many success stories and they often have common elements.

[9:15 a.m.]

Let's take Judith, for example. At 38, she has three young children, she is married, it's not a good marriage, her husband is sometimes abusive, but that relationship provides stability and she's able to care for her children. For various reasons that marriage ends, she finds herself a single mom living in poverty and she begins to drink. Her life takes a downward spiral. She has very few resources to support herself in taking a different route. Eventually we find her children are living with other family members, and she's at a community-based facility, let's say Marguerite Centre, and maybe some of you are familiar with that. It's the first centre in Nova Scotia for women recovering from addictions and abuse.

While she's there, because of the commitment of the staff at the Marguerite Centre and all the work they do with various government departments, Health, Drug Dependency, HRSD, et cetera, she's able to access a wide variety of programs. She gets some parent skills training, counselling, job search skills and, indeed, even some basic skills that allow her to enter the workforce. After a year, she moves out, she - lucky her - finds affordable housing, and she's a success story.

I think there are three things we have to note about this success story of Judith's, and we hear these success stories very often, the media loves to hear them and community agencies and government love to have them highlighted, however, the reality is that it is a success story. It's not two, it's not 10, and it's not the hundreds and hundreds that we need to have a real impact on communities here, and achieve those healthy communities that we want to have here in Nova Scotia.

The second thing is we have a lesson to learn from Marguerite Centre and other centres that serve similar roles in communities. They didn't take Judith and look at one aspect of her life; they, through their own hard work and knowledge of what it takes to help a person achieve a better quality of life, they've accessed funding for programs from various government departments. The lesson to be learned, I believe, is that sometimes policies do not take as inclusive an approach, and there's opportunity to take a look at that and maybe do things a little bit more like an agency such as Marguerite Centre does in the community.

For example, if we have increased education dollars and maybe we have smaller classroom sizes and, therefore, we would expect that all of the children benefit, but if we still have children who are going to school hungry, if we still have children whose parents are too stressed because they can't make ends meet, they can't send their child on that ski trip that, again, many of us take for granted in the things we can do with our own children, it's not an inclusive approach. We have to start looking at all aspects, especially of our young people.

Some of you might be familiar with the Association for the Development of Children's Residential Facilities in Dartmouth. It works with Family and Children's Services here in Nova

Scotia, it houses children who are in the custody of our minister. In a similar situation, that organization is able to keep them warm, sheltered, feed them, but they are not very successful in supporting those young people in accessing education, and without that education they are indeed at an extremely high risk of being on our social assistance roster later in life and even experiencing absolute homelessness.

Just to review those three key points, we are facing a huge challenge that is facing all of the province and, indeed, all of the country. The community agencies that are working with the people who are most impacted are an incredibly huge asset in the community, and they are an asset that must be engaged to a greater extent, and they must be given the resources to do the valuable work that they do in the community, and that the solution is greater collaboration and new ways of doing things.

Community agencies, I believe, understand that one priority with any government is balancing the budget. However, if that's the case - and I think that this is what most sensible Nova Scotians would do - if that is the challenge, they would take a moment and sit down and look at where their expenditures are going and where the dollars that they have can make the greatest impact. Possibly, it's time to do that with the work that we do in community. Government, especially, has a huge investment in community. Those community agencies that are a big part of community are the greatest asset to leverage to achieve those healthy communities.

We, at Community Action, were very pleased in June to have the opportunity to meet with several ministries of the provincial government, and we believe that we have initiated a dialogue that may lead to great change in the community, although we certainly understand how things do not happen overnight. However, I would ask all the members of this committee, it will take more than the ministries' co-operation, because we have to have the leadership from everyone here and vision into what a healthy community is. You have to talk to your constituents about it and take very strong messages back to the ministries, that our investments now have a long-term impact on community, and that we could and should take a good look at what our priorities are. Thank you.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Thank you very much, Angela. I have to say, in my previous life my organization was one of the founding members of the Healthy Communities Network. I certainly appreciate the message that you're giving us, that homelessness and the risk of homelessness is just one issue in a broad spectrum of factors facing people. They work together, integrate together in order to create healthier communities, which is really going to have a tremendous impact on our citizens, so thank you for that message and for that information.

The first on the speakers' list is Mark Parent.

MR. MARK PARENT: My apologies, I have to leave early, as I mentioned to you and to our chairman. It's not through lack of interest. When I was elected, I began to see something that had really been invisible to me, in many ways, before, the homelessness situation in my own riding, in the area of Kentville, where you have roots as well. It shocked me. It's a scandal, in a country as rich as ours, that this goes on.

I was struck by your comments on the stress and the pressure that non-profit volunteer agencies are under. It falls to the coalition of people working together. So, two questions. One is, what can we do to help the non-profit volunteer groups, without taking away the energy and the community support that they bring? Then, in your challenges, one thing I faced in my work as MLA, and I'm sure the other MLAs have as well, if someone's between the ages of 16 and 19 - you talk about the cracks, the gaps, particularly for young people. To find, if all of a sudden the relationship with the parents is broken down, they're not eligible for community services at a certain age. We had a project called Victory Over Violence that was a teen shelter, but getting funding for that has always been a challenge. There was federal funding that started, but it was on a five-year window, and it's terminated.

So, basically, what can we do to help the non-profit sector, without taking away the energy or control, without tying them down with too many regulations that mean they can't do their job properly? And about this particular gap for, what I've found in my work, the 16- to 19-year-old young people, do you have any suggestions on that?

MS. BISHOP: First, I believe that maybe the greatest help that could be given to non-profit community groups is more support for their ongoing operational costs. They spend an extreme amount of time chasing after different program funding, some are long-term, some are short-term, and they are extremely challenged to meet their mission, support their clients, living under that type of ongoing stress. Again, it's not just the groups that work with housing and homelessness in the community, we would find that as a common theme through discussions with all of the non-profit groups that play a key role in our communities. That would be the key thing in my mind. I believe that's the recognition, with more block funding, to recognize the capacity of those community agencies to make good decisions around what their clients need and how they can contribute to healthy communities.

The issue with the 16- to 19-year olds is huge. That's a real gap in policy. I remember, many years ago I was a foster parent, just outside of Kentville. I remember receiving a phone call from a social worker. She was in an incredible panic because there was a young woman who had been sexually assaulted by her stepfather, and that young woman had to be taken into care that day because the next day she was turning 16. Foster homes were full, I already had three foster children, plus my own two, and we ended up taking that young woman anyway, just so we could get her into the system.

We know that here in Halifax and across the province there's a huge challenge for, especially, young moms, that they absolutely fall between the cracks. There are many efforts in the community, a lot of people looking for a solution for that. I've also heard stories that Family and Children's Services is encouraged not to take children into care over 16, even if it's necessary, just because of budget constraints. That really concerns everyone who works in community. So there needs to be a review of that policy. We have to understand that at 16 to 19, people aren't necessarily grown up. At 40 to 50, you aren't necessarily grown up. (Laughter)

Actually, Victory Over Violence did have some funding from the National Homelessness Initiative; however, those monies are for specific projects, not the ongoing (Interruptions) Yes, of those groups to secure their permanency in the community. We do have lots of kids from your area, and I'm sure all of your areas, on the streets in Halifax. Phoenix House, Timothy Crooks, Executive Director, communicated to me that maybe around 60 per cent of the young people that they deal with are not from Halifax.

[9:30 a.m.]

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Next we have Russell.

MR. RUSSELL MACKINNON: Madam Chairman, I want to thank Angela and Wayne for their comments. I was a little concerned when I heard Angela state that the Department of Community Services staff are discouraging people over the age of 16 on that particular issue. But I want to focus on the housing issues, the federal-provincial housing agreement, if I could. It's in our binder here - it was signed September 13, 2002, for 1,500 units at a cost of approximately \$37.26 million. I noticed you indicated on your presentation that there were 26 homes completed to date. Is that out of this particular agreement?

MS. BISHOP: I understand that there were 26 privately-owned homes that accessed funding for rehabilitation. To date we have the six Creighton Gerrish units that are pretty much complete, and the development in Middleton.

MR. MACKINNON: So, all together we have approximately 26 out of a possible 1,500?

MS. BISHOP: Yes. However, I think that the Department of Community Services, Housing Services Division is best to answer that question. From our perspective, whether it's 1,500 or 500, it simply is not enough. Even whether they get them done this year or next year, it's not soon enough because - like the other programs that I mentioned - the opportunities available through the Bilateral Housing Agreement impact on those who are able to access it. There are still hundreds of people who cannot take advantage of that opportunity.

MR. MACKINNON: Right, and that's what I want to focus on. As I interpret your presentation, homelessness is increasing in Nova Scotia.

MS. BISHOP: Yes. The portrait of homelessness that was done in 2003 by HRM did a follow-up study, and in my discussions with the lead researcher on that, they have had an increase. The results of that follow-up survey won't be released for a bit yet, but overall that's what is indicated. Certainly we hear that from community agencies, that not only are the numbers of people who need support and services increasing but the complexity of those problems are increasing. What that leads us to conclude is that there has to be greater collaboration between various government departments to address the needs of people as whole beings. (Interruptions)

MR. WAYNE MACNAUGHTON: I was just going to add to that, as well, not only is the number increasing but the length of time that people are homeless is also increasing.

MR. MACKINNON: That was my next question. Thank you. I'm reading Page 5 of our booklet here, outlining the agreements for each one of the provinces, that's the \$37.26 million agreement - and it says, "In February 2003, the federal budget added new spending over its original commitment to the bilateral agreements, including: \$320 million over five years for new affordable housing, \$405 million over three years for Supporting Communities Partnership Initiative, \$384 million over three years for RRAP, a housing rehabilitation program, and Surplus Federal Real Property For Homelessness program . . .", which I believe you've outlined in there as well.

What I'm curious about, have you been given any indication from the Department of Community Services or from the provincial government in general, Housing, whatever, as to why it's taking so long for the province to take action on what is evidently a growing problem province-wide?

MS. BISHOP: I think that in Mr. Dillon's presentation, and/or Marian Tyson's, what they referred to was doing research to make sure that the dollars were spent most effectively, and that the proposal process is a long one. I believe, from my discussions with them, that they are at a point to announce new projects under the new rental creation program, however, the point still remains that we simply cannot address the real need in the community, even if it were 2,500 units, it would not be enough.

MR. MACKINNON: I would think that people sleeping on the streets would be evidence enough. I was walking to work this morning and there were three young Nova Scotians, individuals, sleeping on the doorstep of a business on Barrington Street, Travel Cuts. It was rather ironic, that that was the name of the business where they stopped to find shelter for the night, inside the alcove.

I find equally disturbing - you've suggested that a lot of people are falling through the cracks, and then I pick up the paper and I read where one of our prominent community leaders is getting support for this program, with a rather comfortable income, and homelessness is

basically an issue around people who don't have the resources to look after themselves. You say the problem is growing and people who are homeless are on the street longer. Have you made any suggestions to the provincial government on how to eliminate that vacuum of policy and communication?

MS. BISHOP: First, I think that it's important to recognize that there's a continuum of housing need. We have to have housing opportunities for professionals in our communities, doctors, teachers, we have to have housing opportunities for people who live on social assistance, and in between those two extremes there's a whole range of housing options that we have to offer.

The Bilateral Housing Agreement was not designed to address homelessness. In some ways you can make the argument that it is a form of prevention of homelessness, because if you take a family and they're stable, there's less potential for family breakdown, and we know that's one of the key causes of youth homelessness, for sure. It could be one of the causes of Judith's homelessness, who I mentioned in my presentation.

The issue around who the bilateral housing dollars should support - we recognized at the very beginning and spoke often to the fact that the Bilateral Housing Agreement was not going to meet the needs of those most in need in our community. We have to address that piece of the continuum as well. The reality is that in the downtown core, the HRM, on the peninsula, what we might see as a very good income for the rural areas or other parts of the province, is indeed not a high enough income to support individual home ownership.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Michele.

MS. MICHELE RAYMOND: Thank you very much, Angela and Wayne, for coming in. I must say I probably don't have enough time to ask your opinion on all the questions that I have at this point. I should just say very quickly, I came to be doing what I'm doing largely through involvement in the volunteer sector with the problem not at the time so much of homelessness as of foodlessness. As you are, I'm sure, only too well aware, homeless at this point means foodless.

Six months ago I was probably most worried about the floppiness, I would have to say, of the Bilateral Housing Agreement, the lack of standards, the fact that there was no way of confirming that there would be, in fact, 1,500 units, that it could be anything, that there was no specification of low versus moderate. There was nothing. I'm less worried about that now. I'm less worried about how many houses are going to be built. I'm considerably more worried about the situation of the people who are telephoning me, when they can get to a friend who has a cell phone or whatever else.

What I have been noticing is that there's an increase, we've all been noticing, that there's a huge flow, an in-migration to HRM from the rest of the province. There's not a concomitant

increase in housing units. And, as you say, there's a huge lack in transitional stuff. I have a couple of questions. First off, do you know, when was the last change in the amount of shelter allowance paid by the Nova Scotia Department of Community Services?

MR. MACNAUGHTON: I think it was August 2001, as far as I know. I don't believe there has been any change in it since then.

MS. RAYMOND: Okay, so it was raised in 2001.

MR. MACNAUGHTON: That's the time that the major reform went through, yes.

MS. RAYMOND: I'm wondering whether you would be aware of how much that raise was? I think it was nothing like the . . .

MR. MACNAUGHTON: It was a standardization of the rates. What happened was it became \$235 for a single . . .

MS. RAYMOND: Boarding allowance.

MR. MACNAUGHTON: . . . a single employable person. It became \$535 for a person who has barriers to employment or who's over 55 years of age. I'm not sure about the family rates, I think it's around \$600 for a family, or something like that, or \$650.

MS. RAYMOND: I believe it was more of a standardization than anything else . . .

MR. MACNAUGHTON: That's right, yes.

MS. RAYMOND: . . . than an actual increase in the amounts of shelter allowance. Are you aware of a room for rent anywhere in HRM at \$235 a month?

MR. MACNAUGHTON: No, there aren't. Basically what happens with a single, employable person like that, what they end up doing, inevitably, is dipping into their personal allowance in order to pay their rent.

MS. BISHOP: I'm sorry, I have to disagree. I think you can find a room in a crack house for \$235, or \$535, if you've got that, the landlord will take that. (Interruptions) An appropriate room for \$235, no.

MR. MACNAUGHTON: And even a lot of those places charge a lot more than the \$235.

MS. RAYMOND: Well, what I've been noticing is that people are asked to make up - I've had two occasions recently, and I realized that the common dominator was - and I don't imagine you can give me the statistics on this, but - that women were being asked to make up

the gap between the board they were being charged, or the rent, on the couch that they were sleeping on, and what they would like to be charged, basically, in sexual services, whether it's prostitution or whatever. Are you aware of this?

MS. BISHOP: We hear stories on a regular basis, and most of those stories are impacting on the absolutely most vulnerable people in our community. We have been doing work around that. We realize that the best opportunity for these people to lead a better quality of life is in non-profit managed housing. We cannot leave that type of need to the private sector. The private sector is best suited to address the need of the moderate income to higher income individuals in our community.

It brings me back to the point about greater support for the non-profit agencies that are currently in existence or that might come to be, to address a gap in our community, and that is a huge one. There have been a lot of efforts around housing opportunities for people with complex needs, mental health issues, maybe a combination of alcohol and drug challenges, who can't access the current shelter system and current emergency shelter system, and who also find themselves as boarders at these rooming houses that we've been talking about. Certainly, one facility won't address the whole need in the community, but there should be steps taken to address the needs of that vulnerable population.

MS. RAYMOND: Do I have time for two very quick questions?

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Perhaps one. We'll probably have a second round.

MS. RAYMOND: What's your sense of how much of the reported homelessness compares with what the actual homelessness rate might be? I'm aware that there are people who are not engaged in the homeless system because, of course, they're not able to report. Any idea? Any sense?

MR. MACNAUGHTON: There's really no real figure on that.

MS. RAYMOND: There's no way to know.

MR. MACNAUGHTON: Part of the problem is there are two aspects to what we call hidden homelessness. One is the people - for example, just in the news recently we had the thing about the old Infirmary - who are living in squats, and there's quite a few of them around town who are doing that. They don't show up on anybody's statistics, anywhere. The other thing, the bigger problem, the much bigger problem is what we call couch surfing, which is basically the number of people - and, again, this comes back to what Angela said about these people quite often wouldn't even identify themselves as homeless, because, oh, I have a place to stay, they're staying in their friends' apartment or whatever. The building that I live in, it's not unusual for one or two of the other tenants - they've got quite a number of friends in the

community - will sometimes have one of them stay. The friends will go around from one place to another to another to have a place to sleep for the night.

MS. RAYMOND: Do you have even a vague sense? Do you think there's two to every one, three to every one reported? Any idea?

MR. MACNAUGHTON: There's no real way of knowing for sure, but the estimates are that there are several thousand in the HRM. When the HRM did its portrait last year, one of the things that they did was a telephone survey by some researchers at Dal, and they added on the question of, do you have anyone staying at your place who doesn't currently live there. Now the sample was small, but they found 7 per cent of people responding to the survey said they had someone staying there who was . . .

[9:45 a.m.]

MS. RAYMOND: Addressless. Thank you.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Leo.

MR. LEO GLAVINE: First of all, my apologies for being late this morning, Wayne and Angela. I appreciate your being here. Interfaith Housing, I understand, now is trying to reach an agreement with Community Services, in terms of turning over housing to them. I was just wondering if you could give the committee some idea of the scope, the number of houses, and if some progress is being made there and the kind of impacts, positive or negative, of that process.

MS. BISHOP: I am not familiar, specifically, with the situation with Interfaith Housing, but I know that throughout the province the non-profit housing providers, who are an incredible asset, are faced with huge challenges; delayed maintenance, insurance is going through the roof, and many are finding themselves in the position where they have to change their mandate or sell off units and remove affordable housing stock from the community. We know that when this happens sometimes some residents have to leave, so they go from quality housing to a lesser quality, stressing their family. We also know that, through the change of the mandate, that's happening. Dartmouth Non-Profit Housing used to be a non-profit housing provider, and they did most of their rental based on 30 per cent of income. Now they're shifting to what you might call an at-cost housing provider. That's a huge change for community and for the individuals that that's affecting, it's going to be a huge challenge.

MR. GLAVINE: So in other words, for Community Services to hammer out this agreement quickly is important, because the churches are no longer able to carry on in the business of providing.

MS. BISHOP: I think it would be wonderful if they arrange something with that organization, however, the bigger issue is that across the province there are many organizations facing that type of situation, and we have to have some kind of vision around non-profit and co-op housing, and a plan in place. I'm not sure what the plan is to maintain that stock to appreciate the benefit that it brings to community.

If we are, on one hand, building affordable units with the Bilateral Housing Agreement, and, on the other hand, losing stock because our non-profit organizations are not being given the support that they need to deliver that service in the community, we balance out in the end. We're not getting anywhere. On top of the other causes for increase in homelessness and at-near homelessness, it's a crisis that we all have to work together to address.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Stephen.

MR. STEPHEN MCNEIL: Thanks for coming in with your presentation. I just had one question on the impact. You said the transfer of 50 federal surplus properties, what is that?

MS. BISHOP: Part of the national homelessness initiative was co-operation between several government departments in identifying and then transferring to non-profit agencies that work with the housing and homelessness the surplus lands at below-market cost. For instance, here in Halifax, that may yet be, at some point, a wonderful opportunity because I understand at some point Shannon Park will be part of that. If there was a large cheering squad around that initiative, it would have a huge impact on our community here in Halifax.

MR. MACNAUGHTON: I was just going to say, as well, when you talk about those 50 properties, we know, for example, within this region, in talking about Shannon Park, in St. John's, Newfoundland, they've made particular use of that in accessing abandoned military properties and turning them into various kinds of transition homes and affordable housing units, what's called supportive housing. It is a very effective tool, because you already have the building there. These buildings are often in very good condition because they've been maintained by federal dollars all these years.

MR. MCNEIL: Actually some were demolished, surrounding the Greenwood area, at the Greenwood base, housing . . .

MS. BISHOP: Yes, that's correct. What you need, if we want to take advantage of that federal government program, we have to have a strong, vibrant non-profit community that has the capacity to take advantage of that, to work in partnership. They have to have the resources to be able to do this, because at this point in time they're extremely stressed, not just in finding funding for the programs but also in the expectations that they have around volunteers. In Antigonish there is a group that has been planning a housing development, I think 14 units, for many years. It turns out it's around \$1 million program. It's just beyond comprehension that even with the support of the Bilateral Housing Agreement, with the support of the private

sector, that such a large project can be managed by volunteers, who also have to, in most cases, work full time.

We certainly don't expect it of the private sector, that they have volunteers come in and do that project management in piece form, and it's about time we stopped expecting it from our non-profit organizations, and displacement of effort of volunteers putting the time into that, what else could that volunteer be doing? It appalls me that we celebrate, to the extent that we do, and maybe I'm out of line saying this, the people who volunteer at soup kitchens. What else could those hundreds and hundreds of volunteers be doing in our community? Maybe the next great invention, absolutely more time with their grandchildren. It's a misuse of a resource in the community, when we have them ladling out soup.

MR. MCNEIL: One of the challenges of a rural MLA is when the term homelessness is used, many people view it as somebody who is sleeping on the street, and we know that's not the case. We know in rural Nova Scotia homelessness is just as prevalent as it is here. The challenge, though, is to be able to get movement around that, when you're talking to people who say, well, that doesn't exist here. I would just like a little feedback from you on that and how that's being dealt with.

MS. BISHOP: I think that comes back to my first point, how we talk about this. I don't believe that we should be using that term "at risk of homelessness" to the extent that we do, it turns people off. They don't get it, they know they can go to their mom's, it will never happen to me, I would never let that happen. People don't believe that one paycheque away stuff. The reality is, if you've got support through your family and friends, it's not going to happen to you, but it will happen to some people. In rural areas, they may not have absolute homelessness to the same extent. I grew up in a rural area, and I saw the housing conditions of some of the young people who were my peers at the time, that I went to school with, and I don't see that things have changed a whole lot on the back streets around Kentville and Wolfville, and I'm sure that's common across the province.

MR. MCNEIL: One of the things that as a new MLA I've been faced with, of course, is a lot around housing and dealing with the fact that we have a lot of old stock in rural Nova Scotia. People are barely surviving and putting food on the table, in terms of what they're making as opposed to fixing up the property they have. Do you see the solution to the homelessness situation being different in different parts of Nova Scotia, as opposed to a blanket policy that will fit all of Nova Scotia? Do you see there being a split on how we deal with that issue in urban and rural? I would just like to hear a little bit about that, if I could.

MS. BISHOP: What we hear, and I think that research establishes, is that in the rural areas there's more of an issue of the adequacy of housing. We know that many low-income households need assistance in that way. That is why the RRAP program, the Residential Rehabilitation Program is in place. There would have been 26 units, as I showed on the screen,

that have accessed funds through the Bilateral Housing Agreement to do that. I understand that is what that number refers to.

In Halifax, the issue - I mean we have affordability across the province, if you're poor, you're poor. You're either renting what you can afford, which is a dump, or being stretched in many other ways. In Halifax we do have a shortage of rental housing for lower-income individuals. It's not clear that there's an overall shortage, because if you can pay, you can stay.

MR. MACNAUGHTON: The other thing that happens here in Halifax that needs to be pointed out as well is that you'll hear sometimes people referred to - and we've heard this from people in Housing Services, for example, they'll say yes, there are vacancy rates, \$450 a month or \$400 a month, but quite often these are units that are quite a way out of the centre of Halifax. They're in Spryfield, they're in Cole Harbour, they're in Lower Sackville. And you have the added problem, for a lot of people, for example, where their job might in the central part of the city, and this is where you get into the whole issue of this is a multi-faceted problem. Then you get into the thing with public transportation, how do these people get to and from their work?

There are so many ways, so many different government programs that actually impact on people's housing and their quality and everything, because, basically, someone who has a young family and it's going to take an hour and a half to get to work every day and get home, for a minimum-wage job, you have to wonder, is that worth it? Yet, that's what people are doing, that's what people are having to do in order to get an affordable place to live.

MS. BISHOP: The working poor is joining the ranks of the at risk of homelessness to a greater extent than any other group.

MR. MACNAUGHTON: The other thing I would mention is in terms of SCPI itself. I salute the federal government for the way that they set up SCPI in the sense that it's not a pan-national program, it is a national program, but they set out, deliberately, right from the outset, to say, okay, we're going to go community by community, and that's how Community Action on Homelessness came into being, the idea of setting up a community group that would look at various proposals and say, okay, is this a good proposal, is this going to help us fill gaps here in HRM and the surrounding area? They have another program that applies strictly to Sydney.

Now this has really only been cities so far, but you have a different program and a different set-up in Sydney, you have other set-ups in other cities because every city's needs are different, never mind the difference between cities and rural, every city's needs are different as you go across the country. I think you do have to have government programs that have enough flexibility in them that you can tackle those different needs and allow the local municipalities to set their own priorities.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Bill.

MR. WILLIAM LANGILLE: I must confess I was a bit taken aback because homelessness, to me, meant street people. I was looking at your definition here, ". . . may be absolute or reflected through core-need.", and I guess it's the reflected through core need - these are the people you're talking about, the working poor, at risk to becoming homeless?

MS. BISHOP: Yes. One of my key points today is that we shouldn't be talking about these groups of people, at risk of homelessness. Some of them indeed are, those without social supports, without family, without anything to fall back on. We have too many Nova Scotians who live at risk of just getting stuck where they are and not living the best quality of life possible because of housing issues, because of poverty issues, and many of those people are the working poor.

[10:00 a.m.]

I believe that if we start changing the dialogue around that, that we are going to see increased pressure on government to respond to that, because, as we change the dialogue, we will have more and more people recognize that, hey, they're talking about me, they're talking about my daughter, they're talking about my neighbour.

MR. LANGILLE: I just want to say that, take certain families - and I've observed this for years - you take a family making \$30,000 a year and another family making \$30,000 a year, both with two children or whatever, one family will have a car, they'll be making payments on their home and so on, and they'll be living fairly comfortably by managing their money. The other people are maxed out on their credit cards, they're deep in debt, on the verge of declaring bankruptcy. Do you come across this very often in your line of work?

MS. BISHOP: We know that there are a complex set of situations that lead to homelessness and absolutely, personal choice makes a difference. However, you are talking about a family with two people with an income of \$30,000, I would argue that the people who have their credit cards maxed out are the ones who are living comfortably because I don't know how anybody does it. Living just hand to mouth at \$30,000 a year, certainly they are not going to Florida, certainly they are not able to provide their children with all the opportunities that a family that is making \$60,000 can. Certainly one of the parents in that household would not - let's say they live in Wolfville - have the money to take a part-time course at Acadia University because it is just impossible. It's very simple math to look at what you can do with \$30,000.

Maybe it's relative. Absolutely, they should be happy that they live a better standard of life than somebody in one of the Latin American countries but I don't believe that we, as Nova Scotians, should be happy with that. I don't even have anything against gaps. A lot of people who work in community want everything level, everybody to have exactly the same thing. I don't think that's the point. I think the point is that the size of the gap is what is at issue and if we have people, even a two-income household, who might make \$32,000 a year, they put in

their 40 hours a week, they contribute just as much to the economy as we do because we need somebody to pour our cup of coffee and yet all these opportunities, they cannot access them whereas someone might put in less hours because society somehow values their contribution more, they can. Those are fundamental things that governments and communities have to start to respond to here in Nova Scotia, in Canada and indeed globally.

MR. MACNAUGHTON: The other thing, too, is I would point out quite often when you start talking about families around the \$30,000 level, say for example in this province, I think if you were to really study that in more detail, you will find that the ones who are doing fairly well, who are able to make ends meet, very often are people who already have a home that is maybe paid for, they are living in the home that has belonged in their family for two or three generations.

MS. BISHOP: Does anybody here want to live on \$30,000 a year? I mean maybe \$33,000. Let's start there. We have hundreds of people who work in that third sector who are making \$30,000 or less and day to day doing extremely important work in our community. Very underpaid.

MR. LANGILLE: I use the \$30,000 just as an example.

MS. BISHOP: Okay, for sure. Absolutely. People have a capacity to make choices.

MR. LANGILLE: The other thing is the influx of people coming into HRM. We know that HRM has one of the lowest unemployment rates in Canada. It fluctuates from 5.2 per cent to 5.8 per cent. In fact, it is at 5.8 per cent right now and I think full employment would be about 5 per cent. Would that be because of the prosperity of HRM as compared to other parts of Nova Scotia? Would that be one of the reasons why you are getting more homelessness in HRM?

MS. BISHOP: Well, I think the case, particularly for families, they may move to Halifax in hopes of better employment opportunities. Unfortunately, the cost of housing probably balances out the impact. I think youth come for different reasons. They come because they know that there is a homeless youth population here. Their own communities don't have the supports and services and they probably believe, in some ways, that they can access employment as well.

MR. LANGILLE: The reason I'm mentioning that, is that a trend across Canada - say Toronto, Alberta, Vancouver - where you get a better economy that you have more homeless people in those areas? Has anybody ever done any research on that?

MR. MACNAUGHTON: The thing is, I think you will find that that is probably true but there are a number of contributing factors and one, as Angela said, is that yes, they are drawn in by the better employment opportunities, certainly, but also the fact as well is that, as

you have a more prosperous economy, your vacancy rate drops, your cost of living goes up. All of these other factors contribute to the homelessness issue as well so to take one thing out of that whole overall picture in isolation is hard to do.

The other thing that does happen though, seriously, here in Nova Scotia and across the country as well, is when somebody finds themselves, say for example, absolutely homeless, they are going to likely end up in one of the larger centres for the simple reason that that is where the services are. The services are generally not available in the smaller communities to help people once they get into that situation. Plus the fact that if you are in that situation and okay, you know that the best you can do in that circumstance is maybe find day work or whatever because you don't have a permanent address, you don't have a telephone number or things like that, then where is the day work available? It's, again, available in the hottest economic spots, like the big cities.

MR. LANGILLE: I bring that up because, you know, I was watching the news on television. You often get flare-ups in Toronto and Vancouver on homelessness. They seem to target those two cities, I believe in Canada, than anyplace else. Thank you.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Before we start the second round of questions, I would like to ask a few questions and since our vice-chairman has left, I'm just wondering, Russell, would you mind taking over the Chair for this part?

[10: 06 a.m. Mr. Russell MacKinnon took the Chair.]

MR. CHAIRMAN: Ms. More, you are next on the list.

MS. MARILYN MORE: Angela, you have actually touched on many aspects of the issue I want to bring up and I appreciate that. It's basically the almost overreliance by government on the voluntary sector to take a leadership role in this very important issue and many other issues. I would be interested to know, what role is the provincial government playing within your partnership and activity of your group?

MS. BISHOP: Well, for the SCPI projects, I believe that certainly they are a partner in the initiative, just in the organization of our work. They provide in-kind support to our office, members of the province sit on our steering committee and we were very disappointed recently to lose Mr. Jim Graham who has actually gone to work with Phoenix Youth Programs. So they play a very important role in that way in that they advise our decisions. On many of the projects they have a good relationship with the community agency. They have served a project management role and further in many of the projects, at least in the past they have made a commitment to the ongoing operational costs of really necessary vital services, facilities in our community.

MS. MORE: You talked about the continuing stress on the voluntary sector organizations in terms of meeting their operational needs at the same time that they are, in many cases, tacking on this other issue. I was very impressed by the list of organizations that form part of your partnership and I notice that most of them don't have housing as their primary focus. It's just part of a range of issues and options that they are trying to provide for their clients. So, in effect, these groups are fundraising, or using some of their operational costs, then, to enable their staff and volunteers to serve with your partnership and do that kind of work. So this is really an add-on to their responsibilities.

MS. BISHOP: Absolutely. I think that the commitment to the members of the steering committee has to be recognized because all of them deal with very complex issues and they face the same challenges of all the other organizations in the community but devote many hours of their time to supporting an umbrella organization that hopes to effect some change.

MS. MORE: Do you know if any of those organizational partners are struggling financially? Often they are actually going to the same department, the Department of Community Services, to get their funding grants for the other aspects of their operation. Is that recognized at all by the department, their involvement in your initiative?

MS. BISHOP: I think that the department is very aware that there are a lot of organizations struggling. I hear regularly from organizations that are struggling, unfortunately. Each has its own particular case and usually they are at some stage of negotiations with DCS. What we have attempted to do is rather than support one particular agency, we are attempting to begin that dialogue with the current provincial government that will put in place a template for a better way of doing things in the future that will serve the relationship going forward, because the community is in crisis around housing and homelessness and tons of other things, but also the people, the organizations that are best positioned to address that are also in crisis, both financially and as far as their human resources, they're tapped, their volunteers are tapped, and it's an issue that has to be addressed.

MS. MORE: So what other things do you think government could be doing then to enhance the capacity of these organizations to work on these issues and take this leadership role?

MS. BISHOP: I believe that the activity and the things that are happening in community have to be regarded as an investment by community, an investment by government. Like anyone who holds investments, every once in a while you sit down and you have a really good look at what you're doing in community, and maybe you shift things around a little bit or maybe you realize that you have a gap here. For instance, we know that we have to invest in our young people, and at this point in time we don't have a facility that supports young pregnant moms, but we know that if we support them so that they are able to achieve some level of education

that there's a greater chance they'll move on to self-sufficiency and not return to DCS when they're older, looking for support.

I believe that we have to really start thinking about the long-term impact of our spending dollars. For instance, through the Affordable Housing Program, the new rental construction, the government is kicking in a housing subsidy for 10 to 15 years, I believe, but at the end, what happens? There's a gap, again, that has to be filled, and a commitment by the part of this current government that's tying in later governments.

MS. MORE: One last question. How are the benefits of what you're doing in HRM going to sort of move into the rest of the province?

MS. BISHOP: Originally, and I have to recognize the original steering committee, and many members who are still on, for their commitment to community across the province. The SCPI program, a national homelessness initiative, was supposed to deal just with homelessness. But you can't separate the two. I know that there was a lot of discussion around how our office and how the work of the steering committee could impact not just in Nova Scotia but on the entire country. The office staff has time to work with national organizations encouraging a greater commitment on the part of the federal government. I'm able to work with the Affordable Housing Association of Nova Scotia around issues of housing.

So, we do not take a very narrow siloed approach to healthy communities. We have money for one specific piece of it, but we want to talk about the other elements of it. Again, I think that shows that my steering committee is a progressive organization that reads tons of research that's out there. Maybe another example would be their support in bringing Gillian Manning with the TD Bank here in the Spring. That's what we're doing.

[10:14 a.m. Marilyn More resumed the Chair.]

MADAM CHAIRMAN: We have three people to start the second round. We have Russell, Michele and Leo. Russell, are you prepared to jump right in?

MR. MACKINNON: Yes, Madam Chairman. With regard to the SCPI program, have you prepared any proposals to deal with the issue of different groupings of homelessness, individuals or groups of individuals, that you've taken this money and presented it to the provincial government for some long-term funding? If so, how have they reacted?

MS. BISHOP: Well, we issue calls for proposals and, as I mentioned in the presentation, we have a close Friday at noon, tomorrow at noon. We have approximately \$2 million to support community initiatives, but we expect that the proposals coming in will total over \$10 million, so we have a huge gap right off the bat. Individual agencies that are submitting proposals, if they have an issue around the ongoing sustainability, have been and continue to be, probably right down to the wire tonight, negotiating around how the province

can support and commit to the ongoing operations of those initiatives. The SCPI initiative will not support something that may close in three years.

[10:15 a.m.]

MR. MACKINNON: Is this the first time you've made any submission to the province for long-term funding?

MS. BISHOP: No, there were several projects that received a commitment from the province through the first round of funding, Marguerite, Phoenix Youth Programs. There were several. But this call for proposals, I believe, is influenced by budget concerns at the provincial level and organizations have been very challenged in getting those letters of commitment from the province.

MR. MACKINNON: In the booklet you outlined a number of challenges: agreements do not meet the needs of persons or families most at risk, provinces must act and act now, governments must commit to the 1 per cent solution, and so on. I want to shift the focus just slightly, because it seems like we're talking about a somewhat integrated issue here, because when you address one issue it has an impact, a ripple effect and so on. So although they don't direct, specifically, the issue of homelessness, which is where you're on the front line, I'm given to understand, for example, here in metro regional housing that there's an over-housing situation that's occurring.

MS. BISHOP: Yes.

MR. MACKINNON: Are you aware of that? And, how significant is that problem? If that problem were addressed, how could that benefit you, your organization?

MS. BISHOP: We are aware of over-housing: however, I'm not aware of the extent of it. I believe that addressing over-housing would address some of the issues in community; however, on one level I am really concerned about, for instance, an elderly woman who's lived in her home for 40 years being asked to leave. That doesn't happen to those of us who can afford our own home, you're over-housed and now you have to go. I have a concern about that, because her children still come and visit her, her grandchildren still come and visit her, but I do understand that there are programs and incentives to encourage that. In some jurisdictions it is a requirement, that once you're over-housed, you move on. Certainly that's something that the Housing Services Division should take a closer look at.

MR. MACKINNON: I'm given to understand that it could be upwards of 50 per cent, whether that's correct or not, and that would be quite significant here in metro. If you have an individual or a couple living in a three-bedroom apartment unit, where they had need for it 20 years ago but their children are grown up and gone, and they still maintain that, while you have a family with three or four children on a waiting list, I find that very concerning.

MR. MACNAUGHTON: Part of the problem with that, though, is the fact that you have a lot of these units that were built some time ago, there was an emphasis on large units, and unfortunately there's not as much need for large units anymore.

MR. MACKINNON: I think you would have difficulty telling that to somebody with three or four children on a waiting list. The other issue, if I could, just quickly, Madam Chairman, it's something that if we're looking at addressing some of this, and it's something I proposed back several years ago, was a reverse mortgage annuity-type program in public housing. Not the traditional one you'll see in the private sector, but rather where tenants in public housing units would build up a credit or build up so many points on a per annum basis, and then over a period of time, they would actually acquire an equity in that unit, to the point where they could, conceivably, take ownership of that unit.

Now my colleague has mentioned about different programs for different areas because of different needs. I think it would perhaps be quite applicable in my area, because a lot of them are single, detached units. The provincial government has been very slow on the mark in addressing that, and I believe if it were put on there - I'm not sure if you've ever had occasion to collaborate with other organizations or give it consideration, I know it was very successful in the Province of Ontario on a previous day. I would like your thoughts on that, and if you know anything about it, and what you would submit to.

MS. BISHOP: I think there's no doubt that the opportunity for home ownership is a positive one. I think people are more committed to their space when they do have that ownership stake in it. The former Minister responsible for Housing, Minister Mahoney, came up with an idea called 5-5-5, that would have been supported through the next round, that \$620 million that the province hasn't been able to access, because we haven't spent out the first round of funding. He talked about a 5-5-5 plan, 5 per cent down after five years and 5 per cent of your income - I can't exactly remember the details, but I have certainly written about it and could send a copy of that out to everyone.

We also had an initiative here in Halifax that is proposed right now, it's similar to an individual savings account for education, where if low-income individuals put x dollars in the bank, they'll be matched by a certain program. I think that's a great solution for people who are of low or moderate incomes, but it's still pie in the sky for the lowest income groups. I can't imagine myself putting \$5 a week away when my child needs shoes, when I haven't been able to take my child out to a movie. So the expectations that poor people pull up their socks and start saving money in their piggy banks is sometimes a little much for me to handle.

I actually had a conversation one time with somebody who was involved with the learn-and-save, and she said she realized that she could save all those bottles and sometime go back to school, she realized she didn't have to take her child to McDonald's, and these are just things that the rest of us - I don't expect to have to save my bottles to house myself, and I don't expect

to have to save money to take my children to McDonald's. I think we have an issue that we have to look at the incomes that people are expected to live on. But it's an absolutely wonderful opportunity for those who don't have the absolute basic necessities to cover first.

MR. MACKINNON: One final short snapper, Madam Chairman. Another aspect is with regard to many of these seniors' complexes that were constructed over the last 20 to 30 years, particularly across rural Nova Scotia. In my region, there's a considerable vacancy rate. We're talking about lack of resources, here we have lots of resources with vacancies and we have people sleeping on the street. That doesn't seem to make a lot of sense, that we have lots of resources, whether it be financial or units, that we're not utilizing these a little more effectively. Has your organization ever given consideration to this particular issue?

MS. BISHOP: Well, I think that comes back to our belief that there should be a review of the assets in community and in particular housing facilities with vacancies. Maybe there could be a review of what that opportunity offers to house maybe young people. It certainly doesn't make any sense that we have boarded up homes, and tons of them in north Dartmouth. I understand we even have some DCS buildings, although I can't confirm that, that are boarded up. It's an asset and we should be leveraging those to the greatest extent possible, and to do that we have to sit down and start talking about the best use of those.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Michele.

MS. RAYMOND: I guess I would like to make several quick comments in response to things that have been said in the last few minutes. You're right, there are boarded up units of DCS which have been boarded up for some three or four years while decisions are made in the SCPI program. During that time, there have been people homeless, absolutely correct. I have no idea how widespread that is. Obviously you wouldn't know how many DCS units there are, currently unused, while decision making is going on about maintenance or destruction.

There is another aspect of homelessness which I am very concerned about and it may or may not fall within your purview. I am wondering if you could comment on the current Residential Tenancies Act. At the moment, I'm finding that there are a number of people who literally one runs across by chance and nothing more who, when it comes right down to it, are reporting very serious violations of the building codes, extremely serious, but under no circumstances do they want those things drawn to the attention of the landlord or of building inspectors because the fear is that these units will be withdrawn from the market, plain and simple. Could you comment on that, please?

MS. BISHOP: Yes. First, I would like to comment just about the vacancies throughout the city because it is the case with many people who experience homelessness that housing is not enough. I think originally that is why the Affordable Housing Program and the SCPI program were separated because particularly if you look at a young person who finds

themselves on the street and you start hearing their story, we know that it's not just shelter so there has to be a combination of housing. We have to have a more comprehensive approach to supporting people so if we have addictions and mental health issues, all the housing in the world is not going to help them if they do not have some kind of support and, again, there is the role for the non-profit community groups that are best positioned to support people in that.

I have not worked a great deal around the Residential Tenancies Act although I am very aware of people's hesitancy to call. We worked with HRM in developing, I think it's Bylaw L-100 a couple of years ago but we understand that HRM does not have the resources to be proactive in checking on rooming houses. They do indeed rely upon calls and it seems the worst housing is occupied by the most vulnerable in the community. They have a huge fear of absolute homelessness and are very reluctant to make a call. We also know that for the poor people in our community, they aren't always able to access different routes, different processes to make their landlords accountable for what they are delivering or not delivering. I always hesitate to not address the issue that not all landlords who house lower income individuals operate in this way but there are enough of them that it is alarming and it requires a greater response from community.

MS. RAYMOND: I have wondered about this and the extent of the fear there because in many cases we are looking at apartment buildings which are run as commercial ventures but they are not subject to any particular kind of ongoing monitoring or licensing. What would you feel the impact would be of regular and mandatory inspections? Would it, in fact, as people are afraid, just plain put more units out of the market or do you think it could be a useful . . .

MR. MACNAUGHTON: I think, in fairness, that if you actually had a regular inspection program, I don't believe it would take that many units out of the market.

MS. RAYMOND: You don't. Okay.

MR. MACNAUGHTON: What would happen is, because the reality is most of these landlords could still be making a good profit if they brought their buildings up to standard. The only reason they don't is they don't have to, no one is forcing them to.

MS. RAYMOND: I mean we are talking fire and flood here.

MR. MACNAUGHTON: But the thing that happens is it would have to be a program which is not initiated by complaints. Anything that is initiated by complaints under the current Residential Tenancies Act, you don't have tenure for the first five years that you are in a building.

MS. RAYMOND: Yes, retribution . . .

MR. MACNAUGHTON: Which means the landlord gives you three months' notice and out you go. That's the way it works. Unfortunately, as long as that remains in there, you have a situation where no one is going to complain. They are afraid of complaining. In order for that to work, you would have to have actual inspectors going out and doing random inspections and then following up on that and obviously that would require HRM or whoever to have an actual body of inspectors to do that and have the enforcement mechanism in place to do that, as I understand there are some issues around the enforcement as well, the fact that we don't, for example, have a municipal court here in HRM like they have in some other cities. So there are a number of issues there but it would have to be a properly organized program in order to be effective.

MS. RAYMOND: A licensing, perhaps.

[10:30 a.m.]

MS. BISHOP: Yes. However, if there wasn't a huge demand for this low-quality housing, the landlords would clean their own acts up. What this leads me to conclude is that there should be an increased emphasis on engaging the non-profit sector in providing housing for lower-income individuals and the most vulnerable in our community because we know that non-profit community agencies have commitment to community, commitment to the individuals. Their bottom line is not the dollar, their bottom line is the health of the community.

MS. RAYMOND: Okay. Can I ask one more, a very quick one? I'm trying to choose here. The Auditor General recommended two years ago that there be regular monitoring of rents charged by housing sponsors. Has that come into play yet?

MS. BISHOP: I'm not aware of that. Who are you referring to as a housing sponsor?

MS. RAYMOND: Those who have received money in partnership, construction sort of . . .

MS. BISHOP: No, I am not aware of any in around that.

MS. RAYMOND: Okay. That was monitoring only.

MS. BISHOP: No.

MS. RAYMOND: Okay, thank you.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Leo.

MR. GLAVINE: Angela and Wayne, certainly one of the discoveries for me in being educated here this morning is that it is a very complex issue, homelessness, and people at risk. When you talk about some new ways of doing things and especially when we talk about the

16- to 19-year-old group, that is a real issue now here in the province. I look at a connected statistic here. For example, the Grade 9 students in Nova Scotia who are there this year, if we stay at the current rate, only 80 per cent of them will actually graduate. Again, here in our province, we have this multi-factor development that is related to housing. I'm just wondering, from your work and your understanding, is this a strongly-related issue, do you think, to homelessness, limited education, et cetera? What is your picture there?

MS. BISHOP: There are two key determinants of homelessness - mental health issues and addictions, and the second is the lack of education. The Department of Education should be at the table to a greater extent than they are around these issues. Linda Wilson talks about 52 per cent of the kids that she knows with a Grade 8 ending up on the street. If we get them housed, if we stabilize a person who has faced a challenging time and they can stay at a transitional facility for a year, there is little opportunity for a better quality of life once they go out into the workforce. They do not have that skill set that we should achieve through our Grade 12 education.

MR. MACNAUGHTON: The other thing that I would mention in that regard, I'm someone who has been homeless, absolutely homeless and spent a fair bit of time in emergency shelters and so on. This is strictly anecdotal, it's not scientific in any way. When you talk to people about their stories - and we are talking people my age, middle-aged and older, of how they got there, whatever, almost all of these people have a very long history going a long way back on a number of different issues. A lot of things that happen to people when they are younger, when they are adolescents or when they are young adults, has a big impact on homelessness later in life. I think anybody who works in the field, anybody who works in any of the agencies will tell you the same thing, that the more you can tackle some of these issues when people are very young and help them to get help when they need it at that point, whether it's for family violence, whether it's for addiction issues, whether it is for just being abandoned by their parents or whatever, it's a good thing because it's going to save you an awful lot down the road. This is one of those things of pay me now or pay me later, literally.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Does anybody else have a question or a comment? Angela or Wayne, would you like to make some closing remarks?

MS. BISHOP: Go ahead, Wayne.

MR. MACNAUGHTON: Well, I don't have prepared remarks. What I would say is I hope we have been able to give you a better idea today. Thank you, again, for having us here to give you a better idea of the complexities involved in homelessness and also some of the things that we need to maybe try to do if we want to solve this. It is something that is, I think, best approached by having a holistic approach to it.

There's not just the case of housing. Housing is obviously a very important component but there are also a lot of other services that the government is responsible for, whether it's in education or health or other things that can help to alleviate the problem, certainly, and hopefully maybe some day eliminate it.

It's always good for us to be able to come and speak to people who are able to take this information and hopefully do something with it. What I would hope that you would be able to do is two things. One, as Angela has said a couple of times, is to take it back to your communities and talk about it in your communities certainly and try to get more interest going, especially, as was said, in rural areas of the province where it maybe doesn't get registered quite as highly as it does here in Halifax. Also, as well, when you get into discussions in this committee and in the Legislature generally, around a number of issues to keep in mind that this is something that is part of all these different things. It's part of housing, it's part of health, it's part of social assistance. All of these things come together to help make a solution to the problem.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Angela.

MS. BISHOP: That's fine, thank you.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: I just want to say, on behalf of the committee, I guess it is always shocking to realize that this basic need and right of citizens in our province isn't being met to a certain extent but I think personally what I am getting out of the reading I had done in preparation for this meeting and the examples you have given is that often homelessness, or being on the edge of being homeless, is really a symptom of other major needs in your life not being met. I think hopefully all of us will have a renewed purpose in working together to overcome some of these problems.

We do want to thank not only the two of you but your steering committee and all the partners within your initiative for the excellent work that you are doing. If there is anything we can do in the future, don't hesitate to come back to us because it is very admirable, what you are doing in terms of taking leadership on this issue and hopefully that is going to spread throughout all of the province and we are going to see some results. I have to say I really commend you for taking a really grassroots community development approach because in the long run, that is going to probably have the best impact and the most effective impact on the issue. So thank you very much. We are going to just continue on with a few sort of housekeeping details. You are welcome to stay or you can leave at this point. We appreciate very much your time and your energy. Thank you.

I will draw the committee's attention back to our agenda. We have to deal with a couple of items of correspondence. The first is the letter from the Cape Breton-Victoria Regional School Board. We have had this letter in front of us before and, at the time, the committee

made the decision that because it was an education item that we would refer it to the Human Resources Committee and they have referred it back to us because they feel it is more related to health. Mora has contacted Debbie Madore and asked for a little more detail and this is the result. So I am just wondering how you want to deal with it.

MR. MACKINNON: Madam Chairman, Ms. Madore also visited my office with regard to this particular issue because she is from my constituency, well, actually I believe she is from Gordie's constituency but she has visited all the MLAs from industrial Cape Breton. Personally, I think it would be a good idea to bring this issue to this committee, whether it be this particular individual or collectively with the Halifax Regional School Board here, as well, because as we recall when the Halifax Regional School Board representatives were before this committee, they indicated quite clearly about the high number of students who are going to school every day without breakfast. I think the figures were staggering, 9,000 or 10,000, something like that?

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Well, generally across Canada, this letter indicates half of Canadian children don't have breakfast when they go to school.

MR. MACKINNON: I know within the Cape Breton-Victoria Regional School Board, close to 15 per cent of the students are going to school without breakfast, most recent figures. I think it's an issue that is worth taking an examination to, it may be, you know, the same in other jurisdictions. It may be just exclusively to these two but we have spoken about the issue of homelessness today and how everything is interconnected and interrelated and my colleague mentioned about Grade 9 students and everything comes down to the resources, or as has been referenced, an investment. Are we going to invest in our youth for tomorrow or are we going to just let them fall through the cracks? I think rather than have a see-saw battle back and forth between one committee or the other, I think one of the committees should just grab the bull by the horns and let's do something.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Okay. So do we have the agreement of the members to add this to our agenda? It will probably come up some time in the winter. I believe also . . .

MR. LANGILLE: If I may interject here, just for information purposes, how do you distinguish who is going without breakfast? Is that by the child or by the parent?

MR. MACKINNON: There are a number of ways they measure it. For the most part, the teachers will kind of do a spot check on students, particularly at lunch hour. Some students just don't eat or they may have a candy bar in their pocket or they may wait for some other student to give them some food.

MR. LANGILLE: I know it is a serious problem.

MR. MACKINNON: It is. It is no scientific thing where they line them all up and say are you having your lunch today. They do it and there are some estimations they do and I think the Halifax Regional School Board officials did that and it was the experts within their board who drew the conclusion about the high numbers and it is pretty much the same parallel with the Cape Breton-Victoria Regional School Board. Actually, the very first breakfast program that was started at that board was started by my brother when he was chairman of the board.

MR. LANGILLE: Is that right?

MADAM CHAIRMAN: I think we could discuss this issue in some detail when we bring them before us. I will get to you in a minute, Brooke. I just want to add that I believe the Nova Scotia School Boards Association also has an initiative underway, or just finished, regarding school breakfasts so I'm wondering if perhaps we could bring in the Cape Breton-Victoria Regional School Board, the Halifax Regional School Board and possibly a representative from the School Boards Association. That, then, would give us wider coverage on this important issue.

Brooke, did you have a question or a comment?

MR. TAYLOR: Well, I want to speak to this, if I might, Madam Chairman. I think it is commendable, firstly, that the school board is doing this. I mean they are trying to provide a breakfast program to their 36 schools in the board and as far as I'm concerned, whether it is 5 per cent of the children who are going without eating a nutritious breakfast, then we darn well should be doing what we can to bring them in, listen to them. It's a prevention initiative, is what it is. In my view it does exactly like they say, it fosters education and also provides for healthy living. It's not always a case of these children coming from poor backgrounds, if you will, low income to middle income and the working poor. I know of some cases where, because of the dynamic in the household, the two working parents, that children are going to school without breakfast. I sit on the Human Resources Committee, not on this one, and as my colleague said, irrespective of the committee, let's come in and listen to what the people on the ground are doing out there to help our children.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Go ahead, Leo, and then I will come back to you.

MR. LANGILLE: Go ahead. Sure.

MR. GLAVINE: I think the case has been made here and, Madam Chairman, you certainly have I think encompassed the people that we need to bring in on this particular issue but in some ways, I guess, it may be a little unfortunate that we kind of dropped the ball in not moving on this last year. It got flip-flopped between different standing committees but I can't really echo strongly enough the importance of us listening to these people.

I met with Carol Olsen just a few days ago and they have a resource person who deals with their breakfast programs and implementation of any nutritional program in their school. She would be a great resource. Her name eludes me at the moment but I can find that out. She is also on the national initiative and has a great comprehensive picture of what is going on in relation to schools. I know that there is a real growing move to actually do something concrete in our schools. She can talk about some of the partnering with the corporate community and so forth. There are also some very good models out there now of an entire proper nutritional approach to schools. I think it would be a very insightful day for us and possibly another way in which we can effect policy that will make for a more positive outcome.

[10:45 a.m.]

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Thank you. Bill.

MR. LANGILLE: What I was going to say, under our new ministry, Health Promotion, I wonder if they might get involved in this because what we are doing is targeting our young people for healthy, young Nova Scotians. It was just a thought on my part.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Perhaps we will let that office know and they might want to send an observer to take in the meeting.

MR. LANGILLE: I would suggest that very strongly.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Sure, good idea. Not a problem. Okay, we have agreement on that. Let's move on to the second piece which is a letter from Andrew Safer. Many of you may remember Andrew. He and his group of students that had started the Youth in Care newsletter project are going after some of the foundations to get funding to continue their initiative and they are looking for a letter of support from our committee. I was just wondering what our procedure usually was with something like this.

MR. MACKINNON: It doesn't hurt to offer moral support for any non-profit organization or group of individuals that are trying to do some good for the community.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: So do you want me to draft a letter and send it out to you and just give you a day or two to respond to it and then we can pass it along to Mr. Safer?

Okay, we will do it that way.

We have not set a date for next month for the topic of cost recovery of social assistance overpayments. Mora, do you want to just fill us in on this one?

MS. MORA STEVENS (Legislative Committee Coordinator): That is our next topic. It was approved last year. It's the cost recovery of social assistance overpayment. They were

informed in June that they would be coming forward in October so it's just a matter of getting that specific date from the department. Just to let you know, it was Marian Tyson as Deputy Minister, Tracey Williams, Harold Dillon and there is going to be an invitation also issued to the Minister of Community Services if he would like to appear. That was determined by the committee back when this was approved, not that he has to appear but it was an issue that if he wanted to come he could. And it is just a matter of finalizing that for October. I hope to have that done by the end of this week so then I will let you know what that date is.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: We still have four more topics left from the approved witness list and there are a couple of organizations that have indicated that they are sending in requests to be heard as well. So we will probably be able to continue with our current list for another five or six months but before that time we will have a chance to submit new topics and issues. Any questions?

MR. MACKINNON: So moved.

[The committee adjourned at 10:49 a.m.]