

# **HANSARD**

**NOVA SCOTIA HOUSE OF ASSEMBLY**

**STANDING COMMITTEE**

**ON**

**COMMUNITY SERVICES**

**Thursday, January 27, 2005**

**Committee Room 1**

**Nova Scotia Children's Aid Societies**

**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. Mark Parent was replaced by Mr. Ronald Chisholm.]

In Attendance:

Ms. Mora Stevens  
Legislative Committee Coordinator

## **WITNESSES**

### Nova Scotia Children's Aid Societies

Mr. Jack Coffin  
Chairman, Presidents and Executive Directors Group  
President, Cape Breton-Victoria Children's Aid Society

Ms. Marie Boone  
Executive Director, Cape Breton-Victoria Children's Aid Society

Ms. Doreen Beaton  
Chairman, Board of Directors  
Inverness-Richmond Children's Aid Society

Mr. Mark Mander  
President, Family and Children's Services  
Kings County Children's Aid Society

Mr. Robert Myles  
Executive Director, Family and Children's Services  
Kings County Children's Aid Society



**HALIFAX, THURSDAY, JANUARY 27, 2005**

**STANDING COMMITTEE ON COMMUNITY SERVICES**

**9:00 A.M.**

**CHAIRMAN**  
Ms. Marilyn More

MADAM CHAIRMAN: I invite committee members to take their seats. I now call the Standing Committee on Community Services to order. Since it's our first meeting in January, I want to wish everyone a wonderful 2005 and I hope everything goes well for you and your families. Today we have representatives from the Nova Scotia Children's Aid Society and we are very pleased to have you with us today and thank you. I know many of you have come long distances and we certainly appreciate the time and effort you have put in to appearing before our committee.

I think we will start with introductions of the committee members. I know there are a few others who will join us, hopefully within a few minutes. Gordie, would you mind starting.

[The committee members introduced themselves.]

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Would you like to introduce yourselves. Mr. Coffin.

MR. JACK COFFIN: I will start. I'm Jack Coffin and I am President of the Children's Aid Society of Cape Breton-Victoria. I am also Chairman of the Presidents and Executive Directors Group of the province.

MS. DOREEN BEATON: I'm Doreen Beaton and I'm Chairman of the Board of Directors of the Inverness-Richmond Children's Aid Society and I'm here in that capacity.

MR. MARK MANDER: I'm Mark Mander. I'm the President of Family and Children's Services of Kings County.

MS. MARIE BOONE: I'm Marie Boone and I'm the Executive Director of the Children's Aid Society of Cape Breton-Victoria.

MR. ROBERT MYLES: I'm Robert Myles. I'm the Executive Director of Family and Children's Services of Kings County.

MR. COFFIN: Could I just make one other statement? You mentioned that we are representing Children's Aid of Nova Scotia. There is no Children's Aid of Nova Scotia. We represent our own various agencies, not a Children's Aid of Nova Scotia.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Okay. Did you have a coalition or a network, though, of the individual Children's Aid Societies?

MR. COFFIN: We do have a Presidents and Executive Directors Group of all of the agencies in Nova Scotia and that's . . .

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Okay, and that's the correct name of it, is it?

MR. COFFIN: That is what we are called at this point in time.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Okay, Presidents and Executive Directors Group. Sorry for that. We now invite you to perhaps give us a five- or 10-minute presentation and then we will open it up around the table and have a couple of rounds of questions. We do have a little bit of committee business to do at the end so I would suggest to committee members that if we could try to finish this around 10:45 a.m., that would give us about 15 minutes to do our other business. Is that agreeable? Mr. Coffin.

MR. COFFIN: First of all, I guess what we want to do is acknowledge and thank you for the opportunity of appearing here today. The invitation came on very short notice. Somehow the initial invitation got waylaid through the system and went to another agency. I only received the invitation I guess partway through last week and by the time we got through to the Kings County representatives and ourselves, it just did not give us ample time to prepare a presentation.

So what I would like to do is just give you a brief outline of the Presidents and Executive Directors Group, what we do and how we function as an organization. I think we also had an opportunity to look at the transcript of the session you had this time of the year last year where the Halifax agency appeared. They gave, in my opinion, a very good description of how agencies work within the province. That same format generally applies to all of the agencies in the province. We have no argument with that and we think it was a good summary of just what happens in the province today.

As a result of my position as Chairman of the Presidents and Executive Directors Group, I would like to now just briefly outline what we do as a group within the province. The group generally consists of all the presidents of the 14 private Children's Aid agencies or Family and Children's Services. These presidents are all volunteers. Their time is volunteered and none of them receive any remuneration for their time. It also includes the executive directors who are generally staff of the agencies. The terms of office of the presidents vary within their single or individual organizations and as a result, their term of office within the presidents group varies from year to year. So there is quite a change from year to year of presidents on this group.

The executive directors are generally staff people so their membership remains very much stable over the course of the years. The group meets generally three or four times a year or whenever it is necessary to discuss various items of concern or of interest to the child welfare practices, problems with delivery services and these problems are generally common to all of the agencies in the province. Then we try to determine what actions would be necessary to try to correct them or what steps we should take to get the issues on the table with the department.

Some of these actions would also include taking these concerns directly to the minister involved and his key senior people. At meetings with the minister, which are generally and normally held at least twice a year, sometimes they have taken place three times a year. These meetings, I understand, and I am only new in this role, have been taking place since the early 1980s and regardless of what Party was in power. So there is a long history of these meetings.

At the present time, I have to report that we have an excellent rapport with the current minister. Actually he is the only one I am really familiar with because he is the only minister, other than one meeting with the Honourable Peter Christie that I attended in my early days as coming on this board. So Doreen, here, who has a better history of our organization than I have might be able to comment a little later when she has an opportunity.

Some of the items that we have taken up with the minister over the last few years are the issue of governance, placement issues is an issue that has received a lot of attention, the recommendations of a previous working group regarding governance and other issues is another item. Long service awards for staff in all of the agencies and it appears as if there is no consistency with this issue throughout the province. Extension of wardships for children in the age group of 16 to 19, legislation, insurance problems that the agencies have encountered over the years and other items that might come up from time to time.

The last meeting we had with the minister was held, I think, in September and generally centred around the governance issue and the Deloitte Touche report and their recommendations regarding government takeover. This report and the recommendations were not endorsed in any way by the presidents group and our views were made known to the minister along with a five-page response outlining our recommended course of action in dealing with governance.

[9:15 a.m.]

After much discussion at this meeting, it was agreed by both sides to appoint a joint steering group, four from the presidents group, representing each of the various four districts in the province, and four from the department to oversee the development of improving ways of addressing areas of concern that were identified by the minister. This steering committee group was to be chaired by Judith Ferguson, who is the assistant deputy minister, as well as myself as chairman of the presidents group. A number of meetings were held to determine the steering committee's mandate, as well there were four project subcommittee groups established to look at the various items that were identified by the minister as being areas he wanted looked at. These areas were on-call services, placement, shared services, and foster care and adoptions.

Subcommittees were established, their mandates were dictated, laid out, and committee members were selected to include both department staff and executive directors from various locations around the province. We felt it was very important that our executive directors be involved in this process, and ensured that the agencies themselves had as much say in the formulating of plans, since they were the ones carrying out the work. These subcommittees or project groups, as they're called, have just been formed. Their initial meetings have probably just taken place. They're just getting underway with their projects. They are required to report on a monthly basis to the steering committee.

The steering committee will meet monthly and review these reports. The steering committee is obliged, I guess, to submit an interim report to the minister during the month of March, and it's expected that the final report will be submitted to the minister in June. It is our understanding - and I'm saying it's the understanding of the presidents group - that nothing will be done on the governance issue until after this final report has been tabled with the minister.

I think there's a general realization amongst all concerned that there is a need for some change in the child welfare system in Nova Scotia. To my way of thinking and from what I can see, I think there's a general consensus that people want to work hard to try to do what's right for the children. I think it's very clear that we might not always agree with one another but I think this type of discussion is healthy, and the final result, hopefully, will be worth it and we'll come up with a better product in the long haul. I truly believe that the minister supports this approach. From my few conversations with the minister, he seems determined. Whether or not the department staff share that same optimism, I have no way of determining that.

I think the major emphasis of our group, the presidents and executive directors, has to be what's best for the children. That's foremost in our mind. I think we want to make that point very loud and clear. I don't think we're prepared to deviate from that particular position. On the other hand, we feel that sometimes financial constraints seem to take precedence in these areas. I think we have to find a balancing act here to ensure that the children's rights are protected

and take priority. I think that's about all I have to say about the presidents group, so I'll try to answer any questions that you might have when I finish my little spiel here.

With respect to other questions, I think we - and I'm talking about our group - will only be able to answer those questions which relate directly to our private agencies, to our own agencies. Again, I would like to thank you for this opportunity to appear here today and say that we're prepared to answer whatever questions you have, within the confidentiality boundaries that we are bound to and bound by.

We'd also like to use this opportunity to expound on some of the good things or the positive things that are happening in nearly all the agencies in the province. It's unfortunate that the only things that seem to ever get reported are the negative things. Because of the nature of the role that our agencies perform, it's very difficult to keep all people happy all of the time. It's a very difficult role. The role of protecting children from threatening situations always creates hard feelings. It is just part of the situation we find ourselves in.

Despite that, there are a lot of good things happening in the Children's Aid and family and services agencies throughout the province. One example that I'd like to make is that we have in our agency a fine young lady who came through the system as a child in care. She lived in the residential centre, she went on to get her high school diploma, got her Bachelor of Social Work, and is now working as a child and youth worker in our agency. That's a real success story in our minds.

Having said that, there are still a lot of areas of concern within the province which require the help of the total community, all of us. Some of these, and you've probably been aware of them before from previous presentations, and that's the dwindling number of foster homes, the more serious problems with children coming into care. There are concerns with children in the 16 to 19 age group, there are no homes, there's nowhere to go. There are similar problems like that. You're obviously aware of a lot of these problems. I think I'm prepared to stop here, and I'm going to ask any of our group if they have anything further to add to that.

MS. BEATON: Just one point, in reference to what Jack has talked about, our committee, when we meet several times a year as executive directors and presidents, it's to help the presidents prepare for the meeting with the minister. The executive directors do not attend that meeting. That meeting is just between the presidents and the minister. I want to comment on the fact that that's a very unique opportunity we have here in Nova Scotia, because I've just finished serving on a national board, and when I told my colleagues across the country that we have this opportunity, as Presidents of Children's Aid Societies, to meet with the minister by ourselves three times a year, they're pretty astounded by that fact. So it's certainly a unique opportunity that we have and one that we highly value.

MR. COFFIN: I would like to add to that, I firmly believe that the minister values that relationship as well, because I think he gets as much out of this as we do.

MR. MANDER: If I could add some comments from the Kings County perspective, first of all I just want to say that I'm the President of the Kings County CAS and I'm a volunteer. In my real life, I'm the Chief of Police with the Kentville Police Service. I think being involved in family and children's services is a great connection from a policing perspective, because quite often we deal with the same issues, the same clientele.

Our boards are, for the most part, volunteers, committed people who have basically one agenda, and that is what's in the best interest of children in our communities. We create that connectedness between the community and our agencies. We understand and take great pride in the fact that the minister, through the private agencies, has delegated to us the awesome responsibility of ensuring the safety and security of children in our community. We also understand clearly the fiscal restraints that are involved in trying to manage that and we follow the policies, et cetera that government has set out to try to manage fiscal resources, tendering processes, et cetera.

The positive things about our agency is that we are proactive, we are preventive. We initiated a family resource centre which has become the model for the rest of the province. We currently, with our Nexus centre, have an outreach program which instead of taking kids into care, we go out into the community and work with the youth. On an annual basis, through fundraising efforts, we also bring in a guest speaker on a particular problem - it might be ADHD - and allow the community to hear from the expertise of that person by opening it up to the public.

We've also created a foundation which I think is extremely important, that raises money within the community to go back to the kids in need in the community and that ties in with this fiscal restraint. We understand that the government, the taxpayer, does not have a bottomless pit that we can draw resources from, that they can't fix every problem. So we decided long ago that we need to raise some money to augment some of those things to be able to, on occasion, if a child is in need - and it may be that they need to be able to do their homework at school because they have no heat in the house - that we can buy oil for them. If they happen to be a ward, it may be that at 18 when their education is cut off, that we fund their education and those are the kinds of things that we're doing.

I think it's extremely important, from my perspective - and this is coming from a policing perspective - that the agencies have that community connectiveness, locally, with volunteer boards.



MADAM CHAIRMAN: Thank you very much, that was very comprehensive and we appreciate it. I just want to mention that we've been joined by Russell MacKinnon, MLA for Cape Breton West.

MR. RUSSELL MACKINNON: Thank you, Madam Chairman. I was tied up at another meeting, I do apologize.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: I do want to clarify something before I open it up for questions. You mentioned that the issues raised by the governance and business model review report had been put on hold until the interim and the final reports are available. I'm just wondering, are there any impacts of that holding position on your organization? For example, are positions continuing to be filled? Are there freezes on anything? Has anything slowed down? Are you continuing as normal, as usual, or have there been some impacts awaiting those final decisions?

MR. COFFIN: I think I'll speak for our agency. I don't know of any restrictions that have been imposed and I'm going to ask Marie if she can confirm that?

MS. BOONE: There have been none. We're proceeding as normal. We are partaking in the process that Mr. Coffin talked about, in terms of the project group meetings, and we're busy with the work there. But in terms of the day-to-day work in our agency, it is continuing. We are filling positions as they become vacant and the normal work of the agency continues on through this process, yes.

MR. MANDER: I would echo that normal work but when you create uncertainty, when people don't know day to day whether they are going to be a private agency or whether or not they're going to be a government agency, that does create human resource issues, tensions. From a board perspective, from my perspective, how do I keep people motivated to move in a direction, when they don't know at the end of the day whether they're going to exist.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: So there hasn't been any impact on motivation to fundraise or anything at this stage?

MR. MANDER: No.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Thank you. I don't have any names. Who wants to start? Jerry and then Stephen.

MR. JERRY PYE: Madam Chairman, I'll start. I know that you're certainly independent organizations and/or agencies, you've already stated that earlier. I do know that earlier we had the Halifax Children's Aid Society before us, as you previously mentioned, and there were a number of concerns around the issue of foster homes. I just want to tell you that parents cited it as a problem which Community Services said later did not exist; in fact, they

say foster parents are growing in number. I'm wondering if that is true in rural Nova Scotia and if you can tell me from your perspective that, in fact, foster parent agencies, or foster parents out there are coming to you seeking your services?

[9:30 a.m.]

MR. MYLES: I have the privilege of having worked in the human service field for 30 years; 26 of those years have been spent in child welfare here, in Nova Scotia. I joined the Kings agency about 17 years ago in a supervisory position and have since become the director. When I joined the Kings agency almost 17 years ago, we had over 80 foster homes; today we have 19. There is a crisis in fostering and I don't think that anybody believes otherwise who is working in the field.

I will say, however, in recognition of what the department is trying to do, we're making a concerted effort to address this crisis by trying to recruit more foster homes. I think everybody is working very hard at that but I think it's the manifestation of a larger issue within our culture where volunteerism seems to be dropping off, we have more single-parent families, we have more families where both parents are working and there just doesn't seem to be the motivation for people to move into fostering as there used to be.

The other issue which is monumental in terms of fostering, is the magnitude of the problems of the children who are currently in foster care. Many of these children come to us with a host of difficulties and challenges: mental health issues; behavioural problems; academic issues; and medical problems. They exceed the ability of many people to care for them under the current circumstances of the services that we have within our field.

We would have to say that over the last decade or two, certainly there has been a massive drop in the number of foster homes. I think we are all trying as hard as we can to regenerate that system but we have larger cultural and social issues that are working against us.

MR. PYE: So I think it's fair to say that the minister's department misspoke when they said there was not a crisis. There's also an issue around foster parents with respect to the adequate resources, both financial and expertise, that are needed to address the issue of the troubled children who now seem to be going into foster care.

MR. MYLES: In terms of finances, I think that I would say generally across the province we don't compensate any foster parent at the level that they deserve for the service that they provide. How do you compensate people for opening their hearts and homes to children whose own parents don't want them, and trying to provide for them as best they can? I think we could give them so much more.

In terms of resources I will have to say that there's a training program in place for about the last seven or eight years which is very strong and is really helping foster parents to develop the skills to care for children. I think it's also important to recognize that some of the children and youth that we have in care have such overwhelming problems that sometimes the professional service providers are challenged to know what to do. When we go to paraprofessionals like foster parents, I think we're all challenged and overwhelmed at times by the needs of some of the children that we have in foster care.

MR. PYE: Forgive me, I don't think it's that parents don't want them, it's that parents are unable, with the resources that they have, to manage the children, their own offspring.

MR. MYLES: Children come into care for a variety of reasons. Sometimes they come to us because they've been abused and mistreated in their own homes and consequently have to be removed. An unfortunate trend that we have in our culture nowadays is that there are a number of parents who have challenging children who are essentially abandoning their parental responsibility and turning to us to care for children that they feel unable to care for. There are some circumstances whereby we have to take children into care for temporary periods of time to try to rehabilitate the entire family. So there's a host of reasons why children come into care. But I would have to say in the nearly 30 years that I've been in this field, I don't think I've ever seen a more difficult time in terms of the problems that our children and youth are facing.

MR. PYE: Madam Chairman, just one more question and then . . .

MADAM CHAIRMAN: I think you should save that, Jerry, sorry. We'll get to you in the second round. Stephen.

MR. STEPHEN MCNEIL: Well done, Madam Chairman, you're the first person I've seen able to cut him off. (Laughter) Thank you very much for coming in and doing your presentation. Just a couple of questions, a little bit of follow-up on what my colleague, Mr. Pye, had said. How many children are going into care on a yearly basis or are presently in care?

MS. BEATON: Well, it depends on the agency. You can have . . .

MR. MCNEIL: In Kings County for example?

MR. MYLES: The current count that we have this year, in this current fiscal year, is 145, but that's various kinds of care. That would be children who would be coming into care for temporary periods of time, some children who are receiving services in their own homes, and some children who are coming into permanent care, either in foster care or in residential facilities. The number of children who are under some kind of a protection order or a care and custody order for our agency, one of 18 counties, is 145.

MS. BOONE: Could I add to that? I would just like to say that I don't have the exact statistics here, but in our agency as well there is a gradual increase in the number of children coming into care. As I understand it, across Canada that is also the trend. I believe Bob Myles spoke to it earlier. A lot of that, we believe, those working in the field, is as a result of the supports in our community for parents. We're the last stop for a lot of families. When the systems in the communities are eroded, the support systems for families, I believe, and it's supported by others, that that's part of why we're seeing an increased number of children.

One last comment, and I'm sorry to go on but, we also hear in this country about the increase in child poverty. Many of the families, a very high percentage of families that are referred to Children's Aid Societies are people living on low-fixed incomes. We're talking about many systemic issues that go beyond just the child welfare.

MR. MCNEIL: When a child comes into care, the professional support services that that child requires, are they consistent across the province? Would they be, I guess you as chairman of the presidents of the association, consistent across the province? For example, if a child goes into care in Kings County, are the professional services that he would require available in the Valley, the same as they would be in metro?

MR. COFFIN: I'm just guessing at this, at this stage, I'm not really in a sound position to say with any authority, but I'm of the assumption that the services would be similar. There would be the same types of services available for children in one part of the province as in the other.

MS. BEATON: But those services, in particular if you're in a rural area, as we are in Inverness-Richmond, in order to get the best professional services, you sometimes have to take the children out of the community or you bring the professionals into your community. We all strive, I think, for the same level of care for the children with whom we come in contact, but the level of service in every community is not the same, as applies to all other services, education, health, whatever.

MR. COFFIN: I thought you were referring to the staff, the staff within each of the agencies.

MR. MCNEIL: No, I was thinking of the professional services outside.

MR. COFFIN: We might even have to do that from Sydney, to go outside for professional services, as well.

MR. MCNEIL: You had mentioned in part of your presentation the 16- to 18-year olds, it seems from my perspective in the County of Annapolis, the greatest challenge is to meet the needs of the 16- to 18-year olds. It seems to be, for lack of a better word, falling through the cracks. I'm wondering if you could make some suggestions to this committee on the way that

that service being provided to a 16- to 18-year-old child could be improved to provide them with the hope of moving forward?

MS. BEATON: We'd need a lot more than two hours. (Laughter)

MR. MANDER: If I could respond a little bit, I think you have an immediate problem, which is your 16- to 18-year olds and from a policing perspective we're seeing the same thing, that more and more often we're seeing problems with that age group and resources for those people. The federal government said we're going to have a new Act called the Youth Criminal Justice Act, but we're not going to fund any programs. There is a huge need for services for this group.

So you have an immediate crisis that you have to get services to and you have to fund services, and I would suggest through the communities, each individual community can come up with some unique ideas. We started something called the Victory Over Violence Emergency Teen Shelter for some of those youth. But the other issue is we have to get to them younger, so that they don't end up being those 16- to 18-year olds. There has to be some sort of proactive approach at the early stages.

This is where everything, when you talk about a systems approach, is interconnected. I always say that if you approach any elementary school teacher, they will be able to point out in their classroom every child who will run into problems down the road. So if we can get together from a health care perspective, and that includes mental health as well as physical health, an education perspective, a justice perspective, a social welfare perspective and work with these children, I don't think we'll have this problem.

MS. BEATON: What Mark is speaking to, of course, is prevention programs. Many of the prevention programs that exist within our communities are made feasible by donations from the community, community fundraising that we do, they're over and above what is supported by the funding we get from the Department of Community Services. Prevention is something that is hard to put a dollar figure on, because you cannot show the accountants or the finance people that you've saved them \$100,000 by spending maybe \$20,000 up front, but to me prevention is the word that's not heard enough, at all levels of government and within communities.

That is one of our chief functions as boards of directors of agencies, to accommodate our agency to provide prevention programs so that our children don't end up in care. They are so important and we all - I know that every board does its best to provide that kind of thing. We, for example, support a Roots of Empathy program that is extremely successful in the elementary schools that provides an emotional literacy program, if you will, to children where newborn infants and their parents come into a classroom over a year, and it's been an extremely successful program. We have family skill support workers who go into the schools and provide

teen parenting programs, for example, as one that's being run right now by our agencies. They provide a virtues program that's a prevention program piloted in the high schools. These programs are the ones that provide a solid, stable basis for children who don't have that in a normal routine and help prevent them ever coming into care.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Russell.

MR. MACKINNON: I suppose in a perfect world all employees of the Children's Aid Societies would be unemployed, but that's not the case. The point was made about the reduced number of volunteers coming forward, foster homes, it's becoming increasingly difficult with the lack of resources, particularly financial resources, and I hear throughout the province from different individuals and groups who are members of a family of foster children or a child that by extension could offer some assistance, but I'm told time and time again that the Children's Aid Societies reject having other family members become involved in the foster parenting of these children. I would like to know if, in fact, that is correct and, if so, what is the basis for it? For example, grandparents, uncles, aunts.

[9:45 a.m.]

MS. BOONE: I'm sorry, I'm not clear on the question but I will try to address what I thought I heard.

MR. MACKINNON: Well, let me make it very clear.

MS. BOONE: Okay, yes.

MR. MACKINNON: Let's say you have a young couple that don't have the resources, they are not able to look after their children. They lose two children to Children's Aid.

MS. BOONE: Yes.

MR. MACKINNON: There may be other members - they may have siblings who have very stable families. They may have parents, themselves, or even grandparents that have the resources, and the social and the family structure to be able to nurture those children in a very difficult time. My question, in general, is, why are these children being severed away from the family institution and put into rather sterile environments that only contribute to the delinquency of the situation?

MS. BOONE: I would like to speak to that and then I will ask Bob Myles if it's okay to make some comments from his agency. From our perspective and our agency, if there are family members who can support children who cannot live with their biological family, we dance for joy. That is where children should be, as you're indicating.

If children are coming into care of an agency, we must and we should, under our Act and our standards for the province - we have a procedure that we need to go through to do an assessment of the foster home people or the extended family who are offering the help. If they meet the requirements that are part of that assessment, I cannot imagine why a child would not be placed with them. So I guess I don't - that is part of my dilemma, is that we are very pleased and that is where children should be, is within their own extended family.

I don't know if Bob wants to . . .

MR. MYLES: I don't have anything to add to that, if that's okay.

MR. MACKINNON: Does the department have a written protocol on that?

MS. BOONE: Yes, they do and it's very clear.

MR. MACKINNON: Would you provide that to members of the committee?  
(Interruption)

MS. BOONE: That's right.

MR. MACKINNON: So members of the extended family have first option, for lack of a better phrase?

MS. BOONE: I would say, yes. Agencies and staff across the province operate under that philosophy and it's supported in our Act, as well as our standards of practice.

MR. MACKINNON: So when I hear groups such as Grandparents Rights For Nova Scotia, the rights for grandparents, coming forward and saying that the Children's Aid Society refuses to work with them and refuses to recognize their rights as a grandparent, that there is substance to that?

MS. BOONE: There would be some reason for that. It would be an unusual situation. As I said, there is an assessment that is completed and if through that assessment process there is some information that indicates that that may not be the best placement for that child, then we would not proceed in that direction. That would be very unusual. It does happen.

There are reasons sometimes why the extended family cannot provide the kind of care to that child or youth. It's very rare but it does happen. There are reasons for that.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: One quick one.

MR. MACKINNON: Sure. In Cape Breton, you have indicated that the caseload is increasing and the number of foster families coming forward are not enough to meet the demand.

MS. BOONE: Yes, exactly.

MR. MACKINNON: Can you give us a snapshot of what it is today as opposed to what it was five and 10 years ago, those figures?

MS. BOONE: I don't have the actual numbers with me today but it is difficult. We do see a decreasing number of foster parents who continue to provide care to the most difficult children that we have in our care. The number of foster parents in our agency are not decreasing as significantly as in Mr. Myles' agency.

One reason is because we have a larger number now of what we call restricted foster families and they are the families that you refer to who are relatives of the child or somebody in the child's life before they came into care who we approve as restricted foster parents. So we have an increasing number of family kinship, what we call restricted foster parents, in our agency and fewer of the other foster parents.

As I said earlier, that is a sign of our times. I think our department has invested some resources into trying to do more recruiting of foster parents and so on, but it is a struggle to find people in our community because of the societal changes today, who have the time, as well as the interest, but especially the time to invest in the care of children who are presenting some difficult behaviours.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Gordie.

MR. GORDON GOSSE: Thank you, Madam Chairman. Thank you for coming in today, Marie. Good to see you again. Yes, I guess you could say, I have worked with Marie for over 10 years in my former job before I became an MLA, and it was an honour and a privilege in many different aspects of it.

You were talking about some of the workers having some apprehension about private government agencies. Foster parents also have some issues around that too because most of these agencies, as I know it, are non-profit agencies and can go outside the agency, as it stands right now, and raise funds for these extra programs that they provide for children in care. Now with this report and everything else coming in, some of the parents are afraid that this extra money that they are able to raise as a non-profit organization that they will not be able to do that as a government agency and provide these extra services in the community, as was talked about here this morning, like Roots of Empathy which is going on at an elementary school in my riding right now.

I am wondering what your take is on it. The fear is out there also with foster parents, as it is with the front-line workers. I mean, foster parents are leaving as quickly as they are entering the system nowadays. Is that an issue also?



MS. BOONE: I haven't heard a lot about that but I have heard some of that. I think when you are at a point where there are so many unknowns, as we said earlier, we don't know, if private agencies were taken over by the department, what will that look like? So there are many of those kinds of questions, certainly, as you indicate.

We try to work with many community groups and we dedicate some of our resources to doing that, things like Roots of Empathy and you are familiar with some of the work we are doing in the Pier area of trying to dedicate our resources, more to the community, in that prevention capacity. Will we still have the opportunity to do that if we were a department? I don't know the answer but there are fears about that, yes.

MR. GOSSE: Two years ago the union representing the front-line workers and on the government agency side released a report citing their concerns about caseloads. We heard a lot about caseloads this morning from everybody. Do you share concerns that the caseloads are too high or that the seriousness of problems of the children in care require a review of caseloads?

MS. BOONE: We continually review the caseloads in our agency and I think many agencies across the province. I think that that is one of the areas where it may be different, depending on what community you live in or where the agency is.

In terms of our caseloads, we go through periods where they may rise higher than what they should and then we will have other times where, okay, they are pretty much on the line of where we would like them to be. There is never a time where people have nothing to do. It's always very busy and sometimes it goes to the point of being excessive. But there is some fluctuation in our agency around that. Some other agencies may tell you that they have a hard time staying near that standard caseload size.

The challenges, though, of families, youth and children and then our workers, to deal with those challenges that families are facing, are increasing over time. The complexity of working with families that have addiction problems or that have serious mental health problems - and I could go on and on - those are increasing. The amount of family violence in our community, and I think probably, I can't speak to what's happening across the province but certainly in our community, we're involved in that. They are difficult challenges that we're faced with with the community.

MR. GOSSE: I think a year ago, this time last year, we had Ms. Thibault here, and she was trying to explain some things and some things she couldn't. With the caseloads and with the lack of foster parents, are children being placed in situations that are considered less desirable for them? As an agency would you say that that's a fair statement or an unfair statement?

MS. BOONE: To place a child in care, we have to meet at least minimal standards. So we will do that or we will not place a child in a home, minimal standards at least must exist. Unfortunately, I will say, though, that to find the most appropriate placement for a child or a youth, to be able to sit at a table and say we have three or four homes and let's pick the best home for the child, that no longer exists. But I will say that I've been in the field for 30 years and that hasn't existed in a long, long time. It is more difficult now, but the challenges of finding homes for children who come into care is a long-standing challenge. Who in this group would volunteer to be a foster parent? As the challenges of raising our own children become more difficult, fewer families are interested in taking on even more children.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Gary.

MR. GARY HINES: Thank you for coming in today. Mark, I'm going to address some questions to you because I was quite impressed with your presentation. In such a short order, you were able to paint a picture that I would like to see exist or would hope would exist in all 14 areas of the province. It seems to me that in your community you've done a good job of networking perhaps other groups and individuals who volunteer directly with your group to put it all in perspective so that you're not working counter to what others might be trying to do. Would I be correct in assuming that?

MR. MANDER: Yes, there's a lot of effort within our community, early on, from all the different volunteers who I meet with and the committees that I meet with to focus on certain areas, let's not duplicate what someone else is doing, let's try to put all our efforts together.

MR. HINES: And in your area, as well, I'll go back many years ago with the sad situation regarding the Goler families and that issue. That would never have been resolved, had it not been for the intestinal fortitude of one child and a caseworker who was in that area, who came out of British Columbia where they had experienced a similar situation with people. Do you think that perhaps in your area there's a greater awareness on the part of your members and so on as a result of that, to look a little further outside the box, and that maybe the warning signals and the signs would be more evident and prevalent to your areas?

MR. MANDER: Most certainly. Spawned from that whole Goler issue was a committee to look at that issue as to us as service providers, and that includes justice, mental health, et cetera, what could we have done better? That did spawn a lot of different proactive, preventive things.

MR. HINES: Do you get a lot of involvement with the youth in the community in a buddy system, whereby youth will come forward and there will be a child in trouble, that you may get a buddy system that you can help support? Do you get some of that with the youth involvement, or do you find that the youth don't get involved voluntarily with your societies?

MR. MANDER: My community crime prevention officer, and this is speaking from the policing side, does some of that, but that is a resource that certainly is something worthwhile exploring, that sort of buddy system.

[10:00 a.m.]

MR. HINES: One last question, and I'm throwing the question out there, not because I think it's directly involved with the Children's Aid Societies but I would just like your opinion on it with our minister going to Ottawa and perhaps spurring an interest in having the Criminal Youth Justice system revamp its efforts so that crimes of car theft and joyriding and those kinds of things are going to be treated more seriously, and perhaps children will be given a record as a result and that kind of thing. Do your groups support that kind of treatment in that kind of situation? I'm not asking this question, trying to put those individuals or youth who commit those types of crimes in the bailiwick where the Children's Aid should be responsible for them, but just because you're involved with youth, I just wonder what your comment would be regarding what the provincial ministers are trying to do in relation to that.

MR. MANDER: I would suggest increasing the penalty is not necessarily going to stop the behaviour. It's a behavioural issue, and that's not necessarily going to prevent - because a person can do 25 years for murder, it doesn't necessarily stop them from committing a murder. If you have capital punishment, that doesn't necessarily stop them from committing a murder. I think what you have to do is get to the underlying issue, why are young people feeling that stealing a car is a fun thing to do? That's a community issue, and that's prevalent across this country, young people are finding that stealing cars and joyriding and stuff like that is just plain fun.

MR. HINES: A lot of it could be attention-seeking too, because they're being ignored or are falling through the cracks. Just one last question. You've expressed - Mr. Coffin, it's not directed to you, it's to the group, whoever wants to can answer it - you've acknowledged the fact that the minister has been open with your presidents group and that you appreciate that and it's something that should continue, and we will certainly relay that message. How do you feel that you're being dealt with by the bureaucrats? Do you find that they're open to your suggestions and open to the same level of co-operation that you've indicated this minister is?

MR. COFFIN: From my short time being involved as chairman of the presidents group, I have to say my experience has been positive. They've been approachable, they've listened to our concerns, they've responded to our requests for information, et cetera. Recently I worked with Judith Ferguson as co-chairman of the steering committee. It's been a good experience. We've worked together in terms of drafting agendas, preparing notes, et cetera. I think we're on the same track. The other concern, I guess, that I could express is that although we have an understanding that a response to the governance issue will not be made until after the report of our steering committee group, we don't know what is going on with governance within the

department, what plans are being made, we don't know. I guess I'd have to say that our relationship at this point is positive, yes.

MR. HINES: Would you like to have more participation with the bureaucrats as you go through your report preparation and so on? If you had your druthers, would you have more direct input and co-operation from them at this point?

MR. COFFIN: With the preparation of what report?

MR. HINES: The report that you're coming back with to . . .

MR. COFFIN: The steering committee report?

MR. HINES: Yes.

MR. COFFIN: I think we'll have that participation. I'm not afraid of that. We'll ensure that we've got that. It's a joint committee. I feel comfortable that we will have the full opportunity to have our opinions expressed in that report. I think the four project groups that have been established, we have at least two executive directors on each one of those project groups and we also have a president overseeing, as an ex officio officer on each one of those project groups, so I'm sure we're going to have the opportunity to have full consideration of everything we want to put forward.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: If the committee doesn't mind, since our vice-chairman is not here, I would like to ask my questions from the chair, just to save time. I'll try to keep within the five-minute limit.

I'm going to venture into perhaps a sensitive area, but I want to get my concern on the table. I would like to get your comments on it. I take from what you've suggested that the relationship between the political heads is working well, and that's between the chairmen and the minister. But it's my view that, and there's been some brief reference to this already, in many cases the financial considerations seem to be driving the agenda a little more than the best interests of the children. I'm just wondering if this has changed the atmosphere around the relationship between the executive directors and the district offices, with the head office.

I guess my big concern is, how do we protect the best interests of the children, which I think we all agree is what you're about and our main concern as well, when the financial interests of the department seems to be a growing objective? So I'm just going to lay that out there and I'm just wondering if someone would comment on that.

MR. MYLES: I'd like to make a couple of quick comments about that if I could. One of the most significant advantages of a private agency system is that when we're moving into issues like this where we struggle with what's the most important point, is it money or is it

children's needs, we have private boards that can advocate for us, they can speak outside of the system and take on those very tough issues. As private agencies we can do that, whereas if we were civil servants it would be more difficult.

I think one of the most challenging aspects of the Deloitte Touche report for us is that nowhere in that report did it speak to what's good for children, that report was bereft of any comment about quality of service. It was very clearly about two things - control and money and I understand that that's a priority for government nowadays. As a social worker, my priority is what's good for our children, how do we serve our families? When that's not embedded in a report like that, then we have to go back to our staff and our board and say now it's time to fight for our families, now is the time for us to advocate for children whose needs would otherwise not be met. That's where this group has been most effective, in advocating for the rights and needs of those children when budgetary concerns do seem to overwhelm every system that we have in Nova Scotia, and I think it's because of that that we've been effective.

As well, Chief Mander mentioned before, our agency has been extremely successful at prevention programs. We started the first family resource centre in Nova Scotia. We built the Nexus residential facility with a new model of residential care that is now not only being copied in Nova Scotia but is being looked at across North America. We're doing innovative things that I think you could only do as a private agency with the support and governance of a board.

MR. MANDER: If I can comment on Deloitte Touche. I come from a business background, I have a Master's in Business so when I looked at this report and having been involved in the process, I think the report got the result it determined that it wanted to get. The foundation of the report should have been based on what is the current level of service, what are the needs in the community. I think the report would have gotten a different response than how can we save money, how can we gain control.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: I agree with your comments but I'm just wondering, even under the current system where you still are private agencies, if you cannot think of examples where the department has intimidated the private agencies into results that perhaps you would have done differently if that threat of financial control which they have over you because they fund you - I know we can't get into the specifics but I'm personally acquainted with several situations where the agency wanted to go in one direction or the front-line workers and there was interference. Perhaps we'll get around to that in the second round of questions.

So far in the second round I have Gerry, Russell, Gordie, and I think Ron.

MR. PYE: I have two questions. The first question is that I understand the daunting task of the private agencies that are out there providing the services for children who are in need of placement and the programs as well. I've been trying to get my head around this through your presentation, from your agency's perspective you were finding that foster home placement

is a problem and you've also said that children needing placement is growing and that there are a number of fundamentals that create that, particularly in this environment and in this period of time. I'm wondering, when does it become a crisis that, in fact, there are no placements for children and then what happens? Who rings the bell when it becomes a crisis situation? There was mention that there were 80 foster home places some four or five years ago and it's down to 19 today.

I think in my mind I'm trying to say here there is something wrong, something is happening and what is happening? I guess my question to you is when does children needing placement become a crisis situation?

MS. BEATON: The moment you don't have a place to put them.

MR. PYE: And I think that is drawing very near, is it not? So who's ringing the bell?

MS. BEATON: A group like our group, it's one of the things we bring to the table with our meetings with the minister, it's always on the agenda.

MR. PYE: Always?

MS. BEATON: Always.

MR. PYE: Has it ever had a response back?

MS. BEATON: I think in all fairness to the department, as was already indicated, they've undertaken initiatives like the PRIDE training program and there has been more money spent on recruitment. They are trying to recruit more foster homes and provide a better level of service to the children who need to be in those foster homes because we need so many more specialized placements. Perhaps Bob would add to that, it would be great.

MR. MYLES: I also think it's important to remind everybody that as a result of the steering committee, four subcommittees were established and one of them is the Placement Services Committee and I'm on that. We've been discussing the crisis and it has been a crisis for a long time.

MR. PYE: That's what I want to hear.

MR. MYLES: And I do want to clarify one thing. You had mentioned in our agency we had 80 four years ago, it actually goes back about 17 years since we had that many and we're now down to 19. At the senior staff table where all the executive directors and senior district managers and head office folks get together, about every two months, we've been talking about the placement crisis now on an active basis for about five years and we've been really struggling to deal with this issue.

As a result of the Deloitte Touche matter and the steering committee, we now have a placement committee that's looking at not only placements in foster care but placements in residential facilities and the entire continuum of care within our system, and we're making some very significant progress. There is tremendous support from the department at tackling this issue now, so I think we're starting to see a light at the end of the tunnel. In my honest opinion, I think that we've probably got four or five years of work before we get to a point where the system is revitalized.

MR. PYE: Thank you very much, because that was one of the very issues that the minister and his department had criticized, I believe, the comments from this standing committee, when the Halifax presentation was made. I was not present at that presentation but I did read the articles and the minutes with respect to the minister saying that there was not a crisis situation. I hear it again and I'm pleased to hear it because that's the only way that we can really come to addressing the seriousness of the issue that is facing us today.

Madam Chairman, I do apologize for taking this length of time but I think it's important to know that again and hear it again, until somebody hears the bell ringing. My second question is, if you could make a wish list of services or funding directions that would create the most impact for your clients and the communities, what would that wish list be? I would say that's to you, Mr. Coffin, because you'll be speaking on behalf of the agencies.

MR. COFFIN: I think prevention has to be at the top of the heap and I think, perhaps, since both Marie and Bob are the ones who are directly involved with providing for the children in care, maybe we could redirect the question to each one of them. I think they are in a better position than I, or either of the other presidents, to respond to that.

MS. BOONE: I'll try to be brief. Somebody mentioned that in an ideal world there would be no Children's Aid Societies. I think that we cannot look at the problems in child welfare, for example foster care or whatever, without looking at the whole system. I'm a believer in that old cliché, that saying that says it takes a community to raise a child. Until we have the resources in our communities for the children and families that are there, there will always be chronic problems in child welfare and I believe they will continue to grow.

The day that we can direct our monies as a province to support the numerous groups in our community, our Every Woman's Centre, our transition houses, our youth centres, our Family Place Resource Centre, they go on and on, and that families with low income have opportunities to have their children, from a very young age, experience daycare so that they are as school-ready as my child instead of being stigmatized the minute they walk in that school system, and then we're left in our agencies of families coming to us when the children are 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, so much damage has happened at that point that it's really difficult for us to work in ways to address those problems. I would love to see that day that services that have

been proven to be effective to support families do the best job they can of raising their children, that that's where the monies would be directed.

[10:15 a.m.]

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Russell.

MR. MACKINNON: One thing that's quite obvious here in Nova Scotia is one of the biggest addicts for gambling in Nova Scotia is the Nova Scotia Government, and the figures will bear that out. The number of gambling addicts has more than doubled in the last five years. I know that has an impact on a lot of the families, I'm sure, that you folks are forced to try to assist.

What I find very disturbing, and the point's been made about low income, financial resources is a major issue, particularly for single-parent families. Their worst fear is somebody from Children's Aid or the Department of Community Services is going to knock on their door and take their children away. They will conceal the fact that their children are hungry, they will conceal the fact that they don't have the resources to protect their children. I see this, and I'm dealing with a case even as late as this week, where a single mom of three children, with very limited education, is being given the bureaucratic run-around while she's trying to feed her children on \$179 for one month. It's disgraceful.

My question to yourselves is, what percentage of your caseload do you feel would fall within that category, if they were able to have the resources to meet the needs of nurturing and protecting their children, would those families not be split up?

MS. BOONE: I'm going to guess that approximately 90 per cent of the families that are referred to child welfare agencies, certainly our agency, are families that live on very low income. Having said that, I have to add that in our communities there are a large number of families living in poverty that do a tremendous job of raising their children, and we see that. I don't want to stigmatize the poor. Some of them I see and I think how do they do it, I could not do it. I agree with what you're saying.

When we look at countries such as Sweden, and I don't know all the information, but Sweden is a country that supports daycare from a very early age, that puts their resources into daycare and encouraging young people with children or young people in general to stay in school systems so that they can continue their education. When we look at countries such as that and how they put their resources, and they show stats that indicate there are fewer families that come to the attention of child welfare agencies, and I think we have to be careful not to compare apples and oranges, but I agree with you.

How do you help your child at school if you have no oil in your house, and your children are cold, and you are worried about how you're going to feed them the next day? How



do these children - how they stand out when they hit Grade Primary. The other children are there, involved in hockey, which a lot of people can't afford, they have their designer clothes, and then we have other children. That gap between the rich and the poor, I think it has a tremendous impact.

MR. MACKINNON: On that particular point, Ms. Boone, through you, Madam Chairman, when you come across a case that, for example, the Children's Aid Society feels is an issue of the need for financial resources to help stabilize that family institution, does Children's Aid make a recommendation to the Department of Community Services that this is what's required? And what to date has been the general response?

MS. BOONE: Yes, we do. I want to say that when you do that on an individual basis, you're really not addressing that systemic problem that you're talking about. I will say, and I think it varies across the province, but in our agency we have a wonderful relationship with our department people, and we do go to the department and we do advocate for those families. Where there is some flexibility, the department will try to do what they can. Often - I shouldn't say often - sometimes they do not have the flexibility within their policies and so on to meet the needs, but we do advocate.

What we find ourselves doing, though, again, is going to the community. We advocate to our other resources within the community to try to get the families connected to what the need is. When you do that, families feel stigmatized. They've had to expose themselves. Oftentimes we hear from families who say that, although they may look different in the community and they may be labelled as people using the system and so on, deep down they feel that they've failed. That gets in the way of how they're going to parent their children. I don't know if I've rambled on, but.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Gordie.

MR. GOSSE: I guess in my listening to the presentation here this morning and everything else, the topic that keeps coming up is prevention money. Myself, as an executive director of a youth centre that was a Boys and Girls Club that I started myself, well-known in Cape Breton, the point I'm trying to make here is - I'll give you an example of what a non-profit organization goes through to try to get money for prevention services. You live from grant to grant. And I know for a fact the Children's Aid Society in Cape Breton received \$40,000 from the Royal Bank Financial Group for grants for after-school programs, but as an agency living from grant to grant, all the time, continuously, not providing any - it's difficult for the staff because the guy is getting laid off, there's unemployment.

I'll give you an example, seven years as an executive director I'd written to the Community Services Minister for the Province of Nova Scotia, on a continuous basis, to Minister Peter Christie, before Minister David Morse, each year, looking for a minimal amount

of \$15,000 for a youth centre that provides constructive programming to youth, with no charge to anybody who goes through the doors of that centre. The reason I put that centre there was I didn't want to charge. I can eliminate a lot of things by not having any kind or amount of price for anything, for a dance, for anything, for weightlifting, for tae kwon do, it's free. Everything in there, breakfast program, lunch program, free, for seven years.

As an executive director and a youth worker, I found myself becoming a funding and marketing person, writing the Community Mobilization Program, writing the federal government, to live from grant to grant. I understand what the agencies are going through today, because I worked in that field for 15 years. I know. You're saying prevention. Now you're seeing us today, as a group, coming to Community Services and saying prevention, but yet we still do not have the dollars put by this government into prevention, for many non-profit organizations across the province.

I can give you a list of letters from 1997 to right now, 2005, looking for \$15,000. How much would that be in prevention, for a young fellow, like you said? I've taken youth in care in your organizations and given them Summer jobs, taken them out of care and given them their first jobs and given them their first bank accounts. But, I mean, \$15,000 for seven years, denied, denied.

I know what your organizations are going through, and it's very difficult. You say about prevention money, Madam Chairman. I know we're in the short- snapper round, so I'm going to ask Marie one more little short question. I wanted to ask Marie, when is the residential centre in Sydney going to be open? I asked this a year ago, I was told April 1, 2004, and here I am in 2005 and still the centre is not open. I met with the director, and I want to know, can you give me a date, please, when the centre is going to be open?

MS. BOONE: Well, this is a success story, finally. In terms of good things happening, we have, I think, a centre, you'll not find anything better in our province and, I doubt, in Canada, a centre for youth who come into care, a residential centre. The grand opening for that centre will be February 22<sup>nd</sup>, and we'll ensure that your name is on Jack's guest list for that. It is a wonderful centre, and an expanded program that will be happening out of that centre. We're trying to build something that is as great as what they're offering in Bob's and Mark's agency in the Kentville area.

MR. MANDER: Could I just respond to his comment about grants? Been there, done that, still do that. What we need for prevention is sustainable funding, core funding.

What happens is - and the federal government is really good at this - they will seed grant. So you gear yourself up for something great and then you lose your funding. Then you gear yourself up for something great, you get the big starter and then lose your funding. There needs to be sustainable funding for these types of initiatives, especially with your youth centre.

I have always said if you look at the Youth Criminal Justice Act right now and you look at the Waterville Youth Centre, their stats are down. They used to have 100-some-odd kids in there and now they're down to 35, or whatever. I don't know what they're down to. They're down significantly from what I hear. It costs over \$100,000 to house one person there. So give me the \$100,000 that you saved there, in my community, and I will keep 10 of them out of jail. That's run by the province, the youth centre. So there's money within the system, I think, that can be diverted.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Thank you. Ron.

MR. RONALD CHISHOLM: Thank you, Madam Chairman, and thank you for your presentation today. Like I said, it sort of brings me back a few years in time, just sitting here thinking about, or talking about the foster homes and the difficulties that we're having in finding foster homes. I'm just thinking about my home community of Goshen, Guysborough County. You know, 25 years ago, there were probably five homes that took in foster kids. Today there is probably none. Well, I know there's none.

My own family, my in-laws, took in foster children for years. There were children that came there as babies and went to school, left there at 18, 19 years old for university, community college, or whatever.

My wife and I took in a foster child one time. I probably can't tell you where I was a week ago but I can tell you where I was on September 28, 1978. I was taking a young fellow, two years old, back to Children's Aid after having him for very close to a year. So it's a difficult situation for a lot of families and maybe it's a little bit selfish on our part, but we never took a foster child after that, just because of the difficulties it was to have them for close to a year and then having to bring them back. Some people are good at that, some people are not good at that.

So what suggestion do you have to get foster parents or to get more foster homes available? It seems like there's more money that goes into these types of programs but it doesn't seem to be working.

MR. MYLES: There will always be a need for foster families in our communities. But there is one thing that we are learning as a result of having few foster homes. That is, that there are some children who are better served in their homes when we can plug in very significant resources. Unfortunately, some children with extreme behavioural and conduct disorders don't do well in foster homes or in residential care or in any placement setting. In fact, to be successful with those children and youth, the only thing that we are learning from our personal experiences, as well as the research and social work field, is that we need to plug more and more resources into the family and rehabilitate the entire family system to prevent children from coming into care.

I think that the needs of our system will always exceed the current available foster care resources. I also think that cultural trends are preventing more and more people from coming into foster care. I'm not sure that that is going to change in the foreseeable future. So it's now forcing us to look at other alternatives to placement and I think that that's something that our field is really struggling with. However, that is where we have to go back to the issue of prevention. We have to put in services to families much earlier.

We know that when we are serving adolescents who are displaying extreme behaviour, we are often not terribly successful with them and often we don't see the change until they get into adulthood. But when we can plug money into resources for families when the children are young, the rehabilitation of that family, the lowering in the number of placements has very good results.

[10:30 a.m.]

To address your question directly, I am not really sure and our system is over-whelmed by the issue of, how do we generate more foster homes? I don't think that there are any easy answers for that.

MR. CHISHOLM: The information that I have here, the number of foster homes in 1998-99 was 695, I guess that's province-wide; 2003-04 was only 732, so there's not very much of an increase in people wanting to take foster kids in.

MR. MYLES: It goes back to the point that Ms. Boone made and that is that we are having more and more what's called restricted homes. The number of general foster homes is dropping drastically but now we're going out to extended family members and friends and we are creating foster placements where we otherwise wouldn't have for individual children. The idea behind restricted homes is for that one child. Those foster homes don't necessarily become general foster parents later on. So I think we aren't seeing an increase in the number of restricted homes because of people's commitment to a particular child, but a reduction in the number of general homes.

MR. CHISHOLM: Okay, thank you very much.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Thank you. I don't have any other people on my list so I'm going to ask my next question. Yes?

MR. MYLES: Doreen has a comment.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Certainly.

MS. BEATON: Back to your questions about foster care. We haven't mentioned this anywhere along the line but we have parent-counsellor programs. We have one within our

agency and they have them in the other agencies as well, where services are put in to dealing with children who are extremely special needs or have a high level of behavioural disorders, et cetera. Four of our foster homes - five, actually, but one is for respite - are staffed by parent-counsellors who take the most difficult children to work with. Part of the foster care system has led to the development of these parent-counsellor homes.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: First of all, I want to explain why I am even asking this question about autonomy. It's because I have spent most of my life in the voluntary sector. I mean, so much of what you have said today resonates with me completely. I have been there, I understand. I really believe in publicly and adequately-funded social programs and services, particularly those run by the community as community-based services. I am also a great believer in early intervention.

I guess I see two large issues of everything that we have discussed today that could present barriers to improving what we are doing, in terms of child welfare in this province. One is, I am concerned that there is pressure on people who advocate for children to look at the financial side of things before they look at the best interests of children. That is why I am worried about the autonomy of the private agencies.

I am also worried about the adequacy of the funding to do the work that needs to be done, considering the fact that more children are coming into care and they're more at risk, the severity and the number of problems that each of them are bringing with them.

I guess I am asking you, what can you do about those concerns now, in terms of the autonomy, the advocacy and the adequacy of resources, and are those topics being discussed by the steering committee into the future, or are those subcommittees looking more at the mechanics of how the governance and business model can be improved?

MR. COFFIN: I think the project groups are certainly looking at the mechanics of how these particular areas can be more effectively managed and run. In terms of funding and issues of this nature, I think these are issues that are brought up on a very regular basis at our meetings with the minister. I am sure that is on the agenda for - it has certainly been on the agenda for every meeting I have attended and I am sure it will continue to be there.

There is no question that the issue of funding or the financial restraints, as opposed to the concern and the number one priority of the care of the children or the best interests of the children that has been put forth to the minister at our sessions with him at almost every meeting. That will continue to be the thrust from our side, from the presidents' side in meetings of the steering committee as well.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: But is there any movement on those issues? Those are the two sort of foundation pieces of the work you do.

MR. COFFIN: It's a little premature to indicate what the results of these project groups and the steering committee have achieved up to this point, we've only been working for a month. Our second meeting is only scheduled for the first of February. The first meeting was spent putting the groups together, staffing the groups, making sure we had the right people from the agencies, the right executive directors on the various groups, as well as the department staff to work on these groups.

My feeling is we're not going to have a good sense of any action or results, certainly before March. I think the big bulk of the results should be expected in the last half of the term that we've been given to come up with a report. Really, I think it's a little premature to predict what's likely to come out of that.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Mark, I think you wanted to add something.

MR. MANDER: The government has done well locally in funding certain proactive preventive programs. I see prevention as a philosophy, it takes leadership to be proactive and preventive. It's difficult from the ground up to say we need x amount of money for a particular program because for it to work its way through the bureaucratic system, by the time it gets to budget time it's no longer there. I think what it requires is leadership from the department, from the government as a whole to say, we understand that being proactive and preventive will, in the long term, save the taxpayers of Nova Scotia money; therefore, we would like to ensure that there is this level of funding for proactiveness within these agencies and we want you to give us results. So you sort of seed it on an ongoing basis. It's the same as your youth centre you were talking about, here's an opportunity, we're going to seed that.

I think once you get to that level and you start getting communities involved saying, we're a part of this, I think you'll get tremendous results.

MS. BOONE: If I could just add one comment to that. I want to let you know - you may know already - that although we're talking about budgetary restrictions and so on, the cost of child welfare services in this province is climbing. We're spending increasing numbers on doing business the way that we do. Although we talk about cost containment and so on there are many things that are very expensive in terms of the services so government is spending a lot of dollars on child welfare service that are delivered today.

To add to what Mark was saying, I believe that we need to be brave enough as a province to kind of turn our system upside down and somehow, try to find a way to reinvest, to turn that money, instead of spending it on child welfare and give it to the youth centres and family resource centres or whatever it is in our communities. That is the biggest challenge that we've faced, but we're spending the dollars.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Does anyone else want to make a comment before I ask for closing remarks? Gordie.

MR. GOSSE: Just another point on when we were talking about the report and everything else and the way the department and government is going with the report. I think I heard one of the presenters say that they were worried about the staff, from being an outside agency, seeing it from the outside, can advocate for different things within the agency. I'm just wondering, when it becomes a government program, will it fall under the new regulations that the government passed in the Legislature, the whistleblower legislation? That would be a concern of mine also, being a government agency who would they report to? We know the regulations that the government put in the legislation just recently about reporting to the supervisor and all that stuff and I see this agency falling into that hole also.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Jerry, did you have a closing comment?

MR. PYE: I wanted to say that I appreciate your presence here today and that I want you to know that I fully understand the difficulties that are out there - I shouldn't say that I fully understand but I have some understanding from you of the difficulties that you are faced with with the limited resources available to you. Also, you do so much work yourself in fundraising, it takes away from the other programs and service you would normally provide simply to generate those revenues to provide for the proactive programs that you see as preventive and proactive programs and the community comes to your rescue and does a lot of that.

I think the real crux of the problem is that if I go back to I believe it was Ms. Boone who said, 90 per cent of the clients who come to us are clients and children who come through poverty. And if, in fact, that is a real problem, in my consistent seven years of challenging the Minister of Community Services to provide additional financial resources to meet the needs of families who are in need in this province, rings a bell or sends a signal back out, that there is where you need to be even more proactive.

You need to have the intestinal fortitude to tell Nova Scotians that there needs to be more money put into those shelter components, those needs components and so on, and that, in fact, the monies that are being used - even though they're not calculated from the Child Tax Benefit - are still being calculated by the Department of Community Services, which never had been calculated prior to 1998. Those are the kinds of things you need to look at with respect to addressing this very serious issue. Maybe then there would be a world without a Children's Aid Society in it.

I think even in that world, there will always be the need for a Children's Aid Society because no matter how much you provide for people there are people who simply cannot meet the needs themselves and have difficulty raising children. That is a fact of life and we all know it.

I just wanted to make one small comment around an issue that my colleague, the member for Cape Breton West, made with respect to the role of siblings, grandparents, mothers, fathers and so on.

The constant complaint that I have gotten from the Grandparents Rights For Nova Scotia Association with respect to having custody of their children, rather than going into Children's Aid services, was that there was such rigid testing done of them, and there was such concern that if they were to have the child that it may not be in the best interest of the child because the biological parent would have access to the child. For that very reason, those individuals did not get the children, even though they have met the test, met the standards and they have said they will prevent those parents from having access or coming near the children, and that is frustrating.

I don't care what kind of parent you are, the fact that you see your grandchild out there in the hands of someone else and you don't have the opportunity to rear that child, to me, that's a very serious problem. I just wanted to bring back some clarity with respect to the member for Cape Breton West on saying that. I think it's something I know you're dealing with simply because of the difficulty you have with placements. I think that that's something that should have been looked at a long time ago. Thank you so very much for your presentation.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Gary, you just have a quick comment?

MR. HINES: Just a quick comment, yes. I'm a great believer in corporate social conscience in communities. I think lots of times you have to invite corporations to have a social conscience. I think this is an issue for proactive participation by corporations in terms of funding for proactivity because their bottom line is always affected by youth crime and so on. Maybe a good campaign towards corporate Canada may be of great assistance in terms of finance as well and I think the people who are at the table now should bring that message to them.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Mr. Coffin, would you like to make a closing statement or any of your group make a final comment?

MR. COFFIN: I just want to thank the committee for hearing us out. Our invitation notice was very short and we certainly appreciate the opportunity to put our views across. We hope we have been helpful to you people in your deliberations as well. Thank you.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: I just want to say, on behalf of the committee, I'm sure we have found this extremely informative. Often we hear about Children's Aid Societies when something negative happens and I think you've provided a very comprehensive overview of the kind of work you do and the vision you have for the future. On behalf of the committee, I want to thank you and your agencies for the terrific work that you're doing on behalf of children and communities.



[10:45 a.m.]

As you know, we represent all three political Parties around the committee table and hopefully, collectively, we have the political will to invest in healthy children and families before they have need of your services, but thank you for being there. We appreciate you coming today.

We're going to go into committee business and if you want you can step outside. I suspect the media might have a few questions for you, but you are welcome to stay if you choose to do that. Perhaps we'll just take a one-minute break, and then we'll reconvene.

[10:46 a.m. The committee recessed.]

[10:50 a.m. The committee reconvened.]

MADAM CHAIRMAN: We only have 10 minutes, so let's get down to business here. Basically we need to talk about a couple of things, the topics for the next couple of meetings, and also, do you remember that e-mail I sent around before Christmas, just asking for input from the committee members on how we deal with time-sensitive requests to be on our agenda? Just to let you know, if you look at the bottom of today's agenda, there are three topics listed, actually if you could pen or pencil in at the top of that the Family Violence Forum. You remember, we still have half of that to do and, quite frankly, the groups involved in that are getting pretty agitated because originally we had scheduled that second forum for September and now we're into January. They're just wondering if it's fallen apart. I've been trying to reassure them that it's basically been because of the difficulty in trying to get the various deputy ministers together in the same room at the same time.

Mora and I talked about it a little bit before today's meeting, and what I suggested to her, but I want to run it by you, is that if we can have the deputy ministers there or the executive directors for, for example, Community Services, Health and the Advisory Council on the Status of Women, I wonder if we could go with a date that would be convenient for them, and then if the other groups that we had wanted to invite were told, please send somebody, if it's not your deputy, then someone who is at that decision-making level, that we might be able to fast-track this a little and not lose sight of the concern.

MR. MCNEIL: Madam Chairman, I think that's a great idea. It has been a concern, I've heard that myself, the fact that we've gone from November and we're now heading into February. Your recommendation, I would support.

MR. PYE: Madam Chairman, I think we are drawing near budget time, and what that forum might spell out to us is the need for additional monies, things that need to be incorporated within the budget. If that's the case, I don't think we can go further than beyond the end of this month, our next meeting, with respect to this issue.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: January?

MR. PYE: No, the month of February. I think it's very important to recognize that it should not go beyond the month of February.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: I think that's pretty much what Stephen's saying as well.

MR. MCNEIL: It was, but I would also like to make a suggestion that perhaps as a committee we could consider making this - we've already made the commitment to this, another meeting. Do our separate February meeting that we would normally do, what we would set up, but I think this is so important that we need to do it, pick a date in February, and if we have two meetings, let's have two meetings. We need to deal with this issue now. Let's not put it off. Let's not fight over whether we're going to have two meetings or three meetings, let's just make sure that we make a commitment to this issue today, that we're going to deal with it early in February.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Can we have a consensus then to fast-track the second forum, and if necessary it will be added as an extra meeting in February? It really is an important topic and it does relate to budget considerations, so we really have to fit it in quickly.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Agreed.

MR. PYE: You did say that this was going to be an additional meeting, a meeting added on. I certainly wouldn't want to see the Alternative Transportation Societies miss out, too, because that will definitely be a budget item.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Exactly. I know Mark's not here, but this is certainly a topic that he's brought forward. So we're looking at that as possibly our next topic. Are people agreeable to that?

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Agreed.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Then we've had the request from the Grandparents Rights For Nova Scotia Association and, Russell, I didn't want to say anything when you brought up the group.

MR. MACKINNON: I didn't even see it on there.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Actually most of them are more concerned about access to their grandchildren rather than custody, the official group that many of us have met with. They have some stories and issues and concerns that they want to bring forward, so I'm recommending that they be next on our priority list.

MR. MACKINNON: If I could comment on that, Madam Chairman, one of our presenters, I was rather perplexed at his comments, saying that they are now allowing children to go into the care of extended family members, where otherwise they would not, and that's because of the shortage of foster homes. So there seems to be, in my mind, still that polarization in their thinking, or there's something amiss. It's just not synchronized somehow. It's like two schools of thinking on this particular issue. They haven't come to terms, fully, with the fact that family is the first option. Maybe I'm wrong on that.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: I don't know, you may want to pursue that, perhaps with the  
(Interruption)

MR. GOSSE: I just have a question. In my list here, in February, Family Violence Forum, the second one, and in February also, Alternative Transportation Societies.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: If we can arrange that.

MR. GOSSE: And then we have the Grandparents Rights For Nova Scotia Association?

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Possibly.

MR. GOSSE: And then Youth in Care; is that the one, two, three, four we're looking at here?

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Well, when we get down to that point, the Youth in Care, I would almost put that on a different agenda. We still have two items left over from that continuing agenda that we agreed to a year and a bit ago. There's the small options homes regarding seniors, left over from that. Remember, the Maritime Advocates For Children in Need? That arose out of some of our child welfare meetings, and we were asked to set up a meeting. I know it's been difficult, Mora hasn't been able to really connect with them. We're not sure how active they are. So that's still a leftover. The Youth in Care Newsletter update, I would say, is a leftover, because that was actually the first topic of our committee after we got elected.

MR. GOSSE: I see a letter in there from them, where they're launching - I looked at some of the stuff we have here. According to this they want to meet between now and March so the youth can write about their experience in meeting with the MLAs . . .

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Now it only applies to a couple of communities, and we've already given them a full meeting, so I'm not sure how high on the priority list they should be. But that's three topics left over that we need to prioritize, the small options homes as it regards seniors, the Maritime Advocates For Children in Need, and the Youth in Care Newsletter, whether or not to meet with them a second time.

MR. GOSSE: Does anybody on the committee have - so right now you're saying February is taken care of, if Mora can arrange it.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: And possibly March.

MR. GOSSE: March, too - grandparents, right? That's the one, two, three as it stands.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Yes.

MR. GOSSE: So we have three things left over. What are we going to do? Right now, to settle what the next three things are going to be, the top three, bottom three.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Russell.

MR. MACKINNON: Well, I'd like to make a suggestion, and it's just come up right now because Stephen and I were talking, an issue that's been in the forefront quite a bit in the last year is this issue of profit and not-for-profit daycare centres. It would be interesting to have a hearing of that particular issue, whether it be from both these sectors and/or the department officials, because there appears to have been a lot of controversy around that and the funding processes within the department. I would just put that out there. I think that would be a good topic to give some examination to before the budget.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: And certainly our Party has done a lot of work on that, as well. This is a third category. How do we add new topics? I don't disagree, I think some of the . . .

MR. MACKINNON: It's just that the Youth in Care Newsletter Project request, we've had them before our committee already, and it's not to downplay it, it's very significant, but there are a lot of other issues that are competing, too.

MR. GOSSE: I don't mind if we bump them down. It's nothing personal. I think they were requesting an after-school meeting, from 3:30 p.m. to 4:30 p.m., when I read their letter. I think it was, I don't think it was a committee meeting. I think in their letter it said 3:30 p.m. to 4:30 p.m.

MR. PYE: Madam Chairman, I also think that it's incumbent upon the committee when in fact they encourage individuals to present before the committee to give them that opportunity. In fact, I think the Youth in Care Newsletter Project, they were here initially for us, we wanted them to come back, I believe. Was that not the case, to give us an update on how things were going and so on? I was not here at that particular meeting, but there must have been some request for them to follow through, back again to this committee. I think if the committee makes a suggestion that they appear before the committee . . .

[11:00 a.m.]

MADAM CHAIRMAN: I don't think they were necessarily invited back, but . . .

MR. PYE: Well, we should check it out and see if in fact it was a directive from the committee, then it should be a directive that's honoured. That's all I'm saying to you. The other question is to Mora, I don't know how you process this with respect to the individual witnesses before the standing committee, but if those witnesses are in fact notified and you have a list of witnesses and suggested dates, not the definite date but the suggested date before them, do you send them off a letter telling them there is a suggested date and give them ample time to prepare for coming before the standing committee? This is not a definite date, but it's a suggested date, and can you prepare yourself for when we request you to come forward, giving them ample opportunity to do their research and preparation?

MS. MORA STEVENS (Legislative Committee Coordinator): Usually what I do is once items have been approved, there's that contact with them to say, you have been approved, I'm not sure when you'll be coming up on the agenda, I might be able to give them an idea as to when they're coming, and then usually about a month or two in advance that I know when they're going to be scheduled, I will tell them and try to nail down a date, so I have that date, especially knowing this committee, it's usually the last Thursday in the month. So I will try to get it as close as possible, so then research can commence and then there's a back and forth.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Could I suggest that we perhaps add the topic of how to add new topics or groups to our agenda to the next regular meeting? In the meantime, in February, we'll hopefully have the Family Violence Forum, the Alternative Transportation Societies; in March, Grandparents Rights; and may I be so bold as to suggest that in April we do talk about child care. Then we'll develop a process by which we can handle new items and use that process after that. Do we have agreement?

MR. MACKINNON: At the next meeting, each caucus could bring a list of suggested items.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: We could, but I guess it's more to do with when we get a request from an organization and there's some urgency to it, what kind of priority, how do we add them to the list, that was more the concern for me. So we're set for the next three months, and then we'll look at a process to handle the urgent requests.

The meeting is adjourned.

[The committee adjourned at 11:04 a.m.]