

# **HANSARD**

**NOVA SCOTIA HOUSE OF ASSEMBLY**

**STANDING COMMITTEE**

**ON**

**COMMUNITY SERVICES**

**Thursday, June 2, 2005**

**Committee Room 1**

**Youth in Care Newsletter Project**

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## **COMMUNITY SERVICES COMMITTEE**

Ms. Marilyn More (Chairman)

Mr. Mark Parent

Mr. William Langille

Mr. Gary Hines

Mr. Jerry Pye

Mr. Gordon Gosse

Mr. Stephen McNeil

Mr. Leo Glavine

Ms. Diana Whalen

[Mr. Gordon Gosse was replaced by Ms. Joan Massey.]

In Attendance:

Ms. Mora Stevens  
Legislative Committee Clerk

## **WITNESSES**

### Youth in Care Newsletter Project

Mr. Andrew Safer  
Project Coordinator

Ms. Ammy Purcell

Ms. Cyndi Rafuse

Mr. Tony Beaumier

Mr. John Walker



**HALIFAX, THURSDAY, JUNE 2, 2005**

**STANDING COMMITTEE ON COMMUNITY SERVICES**

**2:00 P.M.**

**CHAIRMAN**  
Ms. Marilyn More

MADAM CHAIRMAN: I think perhaps we will get underway. We have a lot to discuss and our guests have been very gracious in coming at fairly short notice and so we would like to take advantage of all the time possible to hear their views. So I call this Standing Committee on Community Services to order and I think perhaps we will start with introductions of the committee members and then, Andrew, you and the youth who are with you perhaps can introduce yourselves. We will give you five or 10 minutes for a presentation or an overview, if you would like to start off that way. I'm sure we have lots of questions to ask as well.

So, Joan, would you like start with introductions?

[The committee members introduced themselves.]

MR. ANDREW SAFER: First of all, thank you so much for inviting us and taking the time out of your busy schedule. I am expecting a number of other youth who hopefully will show up. So first of all, I want to introduce my colleagues here, Ammy Purcell, John Walker, Tony Beaumier and Cyndi Rafuse. I'm curious. I recognize, I think, everyone here from a year and a half ago.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Joan is actually filling in for Gordie Gosse from Cape Breton Nova.

MS. JOAN MASSEY: But I was here last year filling in for Jerry. The funny thing is, when I saw this come through, because we are all given e-mails on all the committees, and when I saw it, I actually had it pencilled in to try to come even though I'm not on the committee because I really enjoyed it the last time.

MR. SAFER: Thank you. Amy was here last time, if you will recall. Ammy has been involved, is it four years or three years? I can't remember.

MS. AMMY PURCELL: Four years.

MR. SAFER: Tony has also been involved four years. Were you here last time? You were. So I thought I would just start by saying a few things about the youth who are involved in the program and actually I will ask if you've had a chance to read the newsletter because there is a lot of information in there, or at least glance at it?

MS. MASSEY: I've read it twice now.

MR. SAFER: Twice, excellent.

MS. MASSEY: I sent you an e-mail. The day it arrived at Province House I went through it and I turned around and I know other people from our caucus were reading it also so I think we really appreciated you sending it out to us and we read it again this morning.

MR. SAFER: So you've had a chance to look at it. We have youth who are both in permanent and temporary care in the program. We have youth who are former youth in care; in other words, last year, early in October, there were a couple of youth who are not in care anymore but wanted to continue. Amy is one of them. Then we have youth who come out of care during the year. So there are a lot of different statuses represented. There is a lot of flux in the population. They live in either foster homes or group homes, some independent living and a few live at home. So there is quite a range.

I'm going to say a few things about why youth in care are at risk and I have to apologize to my friends here for talking about them, especially behind my back. For one thing, most of this is probably fairly obvious but there is a lot of instability in their lives and this varies. There could be some youth who have quite a bit of stability who are in care, which has to do with their placement and a whole lot of factors but there are quite a few who have a lot of instability who change placements, for one reason or another, and move out of their school districts so they have to switch schools, which is very disruptive. So I think they face challenges that most youth are not facing. It's hard enough to be a youth, a teenager, nowadays there are certain challenges, but these youth have a whole additional layer of challenges on top of that which makes it quite difficult for them with their school experience.

Again, I don't like to generalize because in some cases they are fine with school and there are no problems but I've seen this year, we've had a number of the youth, for one reason or another, not able to continue with school, who started school in the Fall and are not in school now. Throughout North America, the numbers are about 60 per cent of youth in care don't finish high school. I was talking to a colleague yesterday and she feels that there is no reason to believe that it's any better here. That sounds pretty representative. A number of them have

experienced significant traumas which we don't really have in our experience. A lot of adults don't have a way of understanding that first-hand. If they live in a group home, a lot of times their ability to stay in that placement depends on them staying in school so there is anxiety - they just don't really have a lot that's certain in their lives - about where they are going to be living, who they are going to be living with and so on.

[2:15 p.m.]

So what seems to be needed is some continuity, some stability, anything we can do that can enrich their opportunities, give them a boost when they need it and connect them to the community, as well as supporting them in school. The province really is the parent. I'm talking about the ones who are in permanent care now. So there is obviously a lot of responsibility and I think we can all be doing a lot more to make it more workable for them to be able to make it through school.

I'm just going to say a few things about the newsletter project itself because you are probably quite familiar with it. We had, this year, 25 sessions. The last one is next Tuesday. They focus on a whole range of things starting with writing exercises, getting them to develop their thinking and there are group discussions that also the thinking gets developed on different topics. They have assignments they complete to deadline and they identify what their key messages are, what would they really like to express in the newsletter. So that all happens over a succession of sessions which are two-hour meetings. There is also drawing, there is creating collages in groups, so they are working collaboratively, learning to identify their feelings and express emotions as a way of problem solving and communication. Developing communication is a way of solving problems and expressing themselves.

They learn how to do interviews. This year we had a very esteemed colleague, David Swick from The Daily News, who came in and gave tips on how to conduct interviews, which was a wonderful session. Then this year the group went to Heartwood program in New Germany and interviewed a number of other youth in care which was, I think, a wonderful experience. We will hopefully hear from them about some of this. Then it develops into a Web training, a series of five sessions where they learn how to put the text and images of their articles directly onto the Web pages and how to do scanning and so forth. Then the newsletter comes out, there is the launch. We are very honoured that the minister came to launch this year. It was wonderful interacting with the youth and presenting certificate of appreciation awards to them. We have photographs of those which are going on our Web site.

Then we had a session on resumés which is a challenge. There is an employability angle to this project that is quite strong in addition to the educational angle. So the challenge is to translate what they've been doing into the wording that would go on a resumé, so a prospective employer can see what their experience has been. The last session is on portfolios, putting together the newsletter, along with newspaper articles, awards and so on.

This year we had several extracurricular activities. There was a workshop sponsored by the Nova Scotia Barristers' Society called Uncommon Law, which Ammy was on the planning committee and did a wonderful job working several advanced meetings, organizing the whole event. I think everyone except Cyndi was there. Following that we had a very unusual opportunity to meet with two judges at the Supreme Court of Nova Scotia, Family Division to talk about youth experiences with the court system and legal system. The judges were interested because a lot of times in Family Court they don't really have the opportunity to speak directly with the youth, so that was quite a wonderful meeting. I think we had nine of the youth attend that meeting.

Janet Nearing, with the Department of Community Services came in to also ask the youth for their feedback having to do with placements. She's on a committee looking to improve the situation of placements with group homes and foster care, so they had a lot of obviously very personal insight about what could be improved. So they are starting to be looked at as experts, which is wonderful and ties in with the whole communication aspect. Of course, coming here is a wonderful opportunity and all of these things go on the resumés, so thank you for that.

There were a lot of things that happened outside the actual sessions and I'm not going to go into that right now. I thought I could say a little bit about the outcomes and I gave to Mora just now from the final report from last year, where there was quite a thorough look at the outcomes from the program, so she's going to be copying and distributing that to all of you. I think I can just skip over that part for now.

I did want to go back to the topic of school support. A number of them end up being behind in school, it could be one or two years. There's one girl this year who had dropped out of school, I think, in Grade 7 and now she's old enough to be in Grade 10. She started Grade 10 but she was way over her head, especially in some of the technical courses like math and so on. So, again, there are a lot challenges for them related to school and their educational experience and they need significant help. Again, I'm generalizing.

I think what we need to be looking at is a partnership or interdepartmental effort between Education and Community Services first of all, and then in a broader sense, also with Justice and Mental Health because there are a lot of overlapping issues that fall into one or another of those categories with a fairly high percentage of youth in care. But if we could just look at the Community Services and Education aspect.

This year we started a program called the School Credit Supplement Program. We had some seed funding from two donors for this. The idea is modeled on a program last year we were able to do with one of our youth, who needed one more credit to finish high school. We put a program together through Co-op Education at Queen Elizabeth High School last Summer,

and he did a wonderful job on the project and he graduated. So based on that model we figured, well, let's do more of that.

We were able to raise some funding but it's interesting that so far this year, we haven't been able to use it, because certain circumstances need to be in place in order for one of these youth to take advantage of Co-op Education as a way to get additional credit. The Co-op Ed. course has to be taken in addition to their full course load. I'm more interested in helping the ones who are having trouble maintaining a full course load, rather than adding something else on top of it.

I've talked to the Department of Education and the Halifax Regional School Board about looking at the outcomes of our program and seeing how we can make it accredited somehow. Maybe it needs to be modified, we've had some discussions. I'm not a school teacher and there would have to be a teacher attached to the project, which sounds like it's doable. What I'm getting at is it's a lot of work for one person to try to change the system. The system is not set up to recognize a community-based education model like we have here.

If there was some interdepartmental effort where someone from Community Services and Education could be looking at the fact that quite a few youth are falling through the cracks and dropping out of school, can we look at these alternative education models and how can we make that work? I think it is really important that we figure out how to do that, because we're losing a lot of them. The ones who don't get high school or beyond, their opportunities for earning a decent income are obviously compromised.

I want to say one thing about the expansion of the program. At the moment there are two other jurisdictions in Nova Scotia interested in starting a newsletter project in their areas. One is Lunenburg County Family and Children's Services, and I've been talking with David MacLennan, who is a social worker there. I went down and met with him and some other social workers recently. We are in the early stages of discussing how it can work in a place with such a geographical challenge. The other area is the Children's Aid Society of Richmond and Inverness in Port Hawkesbury. Mike Melnyk is the executive director, and he and I have had some conversations about it, he's interested. Again, it's preliminary but I think the idea is there's no reason why this can only happen in Halifax.

In areas that have enough youth in care, to have a bit of a critical mass where you can justify a full program, then there should be a way to initiate that. In areas where the population is sparse, I think we can connect those youth to the network by having a local contact and asking them to submit articles to the newsletter. We could have a message board put on our Web site, which would be monitored, but they could have some contact that way. Possibly video conferencing, there could be ways to really make this a provincial initiative. Which brings me to the last area, which is funding.

Funding has been a continual challenge, it's year to year. It's not over a full-year period, it's actually up in about two weeks, our funding. This year we've submitted so far six proposals to corporations and foundation - actually eight - and we'll be submitting more, so for the first time we're doing active corporate fundraising. It's a huge amount of work which takes a lot of time, et cetera.

I did receive a call this morning from George Savoury with the Department of Community Services. He is interested in getting together with me and some of his colleagues to talk about our budget, our expenses and so forth. They are aware of the fact that our funding is going to be up in a couple of weeks. So I was really delighted to get that call and I'm looking forward to meeting with them.

[2:30 p.m.]

I have taken way too much time, but I appreciate the opportunity to fill you in. So now how would you like to proceed? Would you like to ask questions, or would you like to see if they have something they want to say?

MADAM CHAIRMAN: I think the members have a number of questions so perhaps we could start that way but at the end, we'll make sure we leave enough time for everyone to make comments if you haven't been asked to answer a specific question. But before we actually start, I'm just wondering if someone can give us a rough idea of the age range that has been involved with your particular initiative?

MR. SAFER: Generally, I would say 15 to 19, but there are a couple of exceptions. Tony is now 21.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: I just want to say I'm really pleased that Mr. Savoury was in touch with you and hopefully, the fact that you were coming to appear before our committee is encouraging the department to take a second and third look at the value of your program. So if we can help in that way, as well, that's good news for all of us.

At the moment I just have Jerry Pye and Joan Massey on the list. Jerry, would you like to start?

MR. JERRY PYE: Madam Chairman, I want to thank the witnesses for appearing before the Standing Committee on Community Services today. I do want to apologize for not attending the meeting on November 13, 2003, and if some of the questions I ask you sound redundant, it's because I'm not aware of the questions that might have been posed to you before.

First of all, I, too, want to echo the comments of our chairman with respect to Mr. Savoury talking to you re the budget and I do know there has been no formulation, it is just



talks in the infancy and that, in fact, there will be a great deal of talk around where budget dollars can be better utilized, I think.

The issue that I want to come to that seems to be very striking right now, and obviously you had concentrated much of your speak on it, and that's around the number of young people in care who do not finish high school. There was some conversation around the Department of Community Services and the Department of Education, possibly uniting themselves together to look at some kind of funding or some assistance that might help keep young people in school.

You had indicated that approximately 60 per cent of the people in care, either temporary, permanent, or in group homes - who are obviously the responsibility of the provincial government - are not completing high school. I think that's very striking. I think it's very serious. It is extremely important to know that young people have had an extremely difficult time through this period of time in their lives, but to find out that the hardship will be even more insurmountable in the future by lack of education is something that we, as leaders, have to seriously consider. Hopefully you will impress it upon the united efforts of both the Department of Education and the Department of Community Services.

You didn't indicate what resources are available now and what the factors are in causing young people to drop out of school at an early age. I'm wondering if you can elaborate around some of that for me and my colleagues?

MR. SAFER: I wonder if one of my colleagues here would like to say something? This is Cyndi.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Hi, Cyndi.

MS. CYNDI RAFUSE: Last year I was in Grade 9 and I moved around a lot. I went into care and I probably was in school for three months through the whole year, because of moving around. This year I moved to a group home, it's really close to my high school, QE, and I was doing good but I got into some trouble and got sent away again, and ended up getting kicked out of school.

I have a really good social worker and she did pay for correspondence courses, so I am going to get those credits. But a lot of people don't have the option for that. A lot of social workers say, you messed up so that's your problem. I think there should be more - I don't know.

MR. PYE: So I guess the lack of stable environment seems to be the most significant factor here. Can I say that?

MS. RAFUSE: Yes, because when people move around so much going to different, especially high schools, it's hard to leave all your friends and just pick up and try to do it again.

MR. PYE: What about resources, you know, financial resources, material resources that will enable you to stay in school? Is that available to you?

MR. SAFER: I don't know how big a factor that is.

MR. PYE: Is it a factor? That's a good question.

MR. SAFER: As far as staying in school, as far as them directly accessing money or resources, I don't think that's a major problem with it. It has more to do with their instability and their anxiety about how long they are going to be in a placement. Even if they are not getting moved, they might have anxiety because they might get moved. It's sort of like . . .

MS. RAFUSE: You never know when, if something happens then, I think there are three times that I was very close to getting moved and put into a different group home, and that's hard, too, like moving into a different place with people who maybe you don't get along with and that kind of affects you wanting to go to school and do good.

MR. PYE: What about connects with their social workers at a time when it's needed, are there difficulties in making that important connect at times when it's absolutely necessary? Also, I've read in the newsletter that some of them have the caseworkers reassigned and they are often new and then they have to familiarize themselves with the new caseworker. This is a whole new experience all over again because they build up some sort of a relationship with the one before and now it's a whole new process. Not only are they having to go to school but now they are having to build up another new relationship. Does that cause problems?

MR. SAFER: Does anyone else want to . . .

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Cyndi, could I just turn Mr. Pye's question around. Thinking back on your experience, when you dropped out, what would have helped you to be able to stay in school? Can you think of any things that would have really . . .

MS. RAFUSE: I think if I had more help, like if I had more people I could talk to about my problems because there was really nobody. My social worker was there, she was there a lot but she went on vacations and had all kinds of other kids, so she didn't have time to kind of focus on me. So I really didn't have anybody to talk to so it just got worse.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: What about in school? Did you have anyone there who you could talk to?

MS. RAFUSE: There was nobody really because there were so many kids. I never had a good relationship with any of my teachers. My guidance counsellor, we talked sometimes and she helped me stay in for a few weeks. She did what she could.

MR. PYE: So the counselling services within the education system were not sufficient to meet your needs as well. Is that fair?

MS. RAFUSE: No, they weren't, I don't think so.

MR. PYE: Thank you for now.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Joan.

MS. MASSEY: Madam Chairman, reading through the binder that we were given and then going through the publication and those documentations and remembering what I heard last time, a few things keep repeating themselves in the documentation. There are some real core things there that I see as problem areas, I guess, within the system. I'm not sure really if it's fair to be asking you, Andrew, some of these questions but certainly if you can't answer them, just let me know.

I would like to sort of focus on some of these issues that I saw as negative things, especially that the youth themselves were writing about in here. You know when there are quotes in here like, "I've talked to my worker's machine more than I've talked to her.", or missing out on school dances, sleepovers, due to a social worker not getting back to them in time, ". . . maybe every two weeks we should meet with our workers . . .", that's a comment from one of the youth saying that is something that would be more positive. So I sort of went through and compiled some little notes: social workers not returning calls promptly, the youth having to leave voice messages, they end up with many social workers over the course of their time in care and, as we have just heard, that's very stressful.

If you are a parent at home and you have a youth, it's hard enough communicating with them when you want to communicate with them and when they want to communicate with you. So I can't imagine somebody in some sort of a situation and it could be anything from I need a prom dress to I'm being abused in some way. I can't even imagine all the gambit of situations that these youth are facing. When I'm reading these comments that youth rarely get to talk to social workers, and these are comments from the youth themselves. I really commend them on sharing their feelings and that can't be easy and coming here today is fantastic.

So my question, then, for you, if you can possibly answer it is, are there any records within what goes on here as far as are there criteria, how often do social workers have to meet physically, face to face, with these youth? Is it once every two weeks, is it once a month, is it once every six months?

MS. PURCELL: It's once a month.

MR. SAFER: It's once a month. I think the calls are supposed be returned within 24 hours but they don't always get returned.

MS. MASSEY: Twenty-four hours is a long time, for me. If I'm a young person and I have a problem, 24 hours seems like an awful long length of time. So, really, that all just snowballs into what also is appearing in this documentation is that there are too many youth, not enough social workers and the need for more social workers. It's obvious to anybody who can read or has any kind of feelings or heart in their body that our youth are not being served by the government who, as you said, are the parents of these youth. I'm sure the 60 per cent dropout rate is a lot higher than the dropout rate, although we are very poor at tracking that, I know, in the Halifax Regional School Board and right across the province. Sometimes you wonder why these things are not tracked well because if you know the facts, it's harder to refute them. So it's good that you are coming in here and letting us know. Numbers speak loudly to people who may be listening in on these conversations.

I don't know if you have a comment on the ratio of social workers to youth because I know they don't just deal with youth in care, they are dealing with all kinds of other circumstances, but is there any sort of a ratio out there that you can comment on other than it's not enough?

MR. SAFER: I think when I asked the question this year - this is becoming a permanent record and I should know an exact figure - it seemed to be about 25 to 1, is what I remember as being a common ratio right now. That is certainly not an ideal ratio, if you can imagine being responsible for 25 youth. It's hard to imagine being responsible for more than a couple for most of us.

Going back to Jerry's question, it was an excellent question and, Jerry, when you asked if there was a financial or resources component to the problem, this is the biggest one I'm aware of, is the fact that there aren't enough social workers because there isn't enough money going into the system to pay for enough social workers. It's not that the youth experiences a lack of financial resources but it's the whole infrastructure is under supported. I don't know if that answers your question sufficiently, Joan.

MS. MASSEY: That's a good answer, I just was looking actually for a ratio there and wasn't sure if there was one. I'm just wondering if John Walker - his picture is in The Voice, and there are three articles in there by him, if not more, but I can see three of them - could give us an update on what is going on with him right now? I know, by reading his articles, it sounds like you're living with your mom now and that you're having a hard time making it through high school because you're trying to find a job and this sort of thing. I'm just wondering if you want to stand up and comment on where you are now and where you hope to be?

MR. JOHN WALKER: I have a job now and I'm not in high school. I'm thinking about going to community college in September.

MR. SAFER: And what changed recently over the last several months?

[2:45 p.m.]

MR. WALKER: I went with Andrew and we made my resumé and then I passed it out. Probably, in about a week, I had four interviews for a job and then I got a job.

MS. MASSEY: So you're just trying to help your mom out financially, is that the case? Are you 19 now?

MR. WALKER: Yes.

MS. MASSEY: So this process really has helped you as far as giving you a high level of thinking that you can do this and a can-do attitude because I saw that in there that maybe you feel like it has given you some sort of concrete . . .

MR. WALKER: Yes.

MS. MASSEY: So it has been very good for you?

MR. WALKER: Yes. Sorry, I'm just really tired because I work night shift.

MS. MASSEY: Good for you. Well, that's nice to hear and I hope that here is an example of somebody who still needs some help along the way to further his education because it sounds like he wants to do that. Thank you.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Mark.

MR. MARK PARENT: Thank you for the presentation. A quick comment about partnerships and then a question. The comment is that the partnerships that you mentioned that are so necessary with Justice, the education system, are you aware of the CAYAK program, because that does form those partnerships and I'm just wondering if you were informed about it?

MR. SAFER: I'm not as informed as I would like to be. I'm aware of it. I haven't had any direct relationship with CAYAK, even though I know some of the people involved. I don't know if it's the right vehicle for what I was suggesting with, for example, this project and accreditation, I don't know if that falls within their area.

MR. PARENT: I don't know either. I do know they are, in an innovative way, trying to get these different departments, where departments are so good at working with - the buzzword is "silos" rather than cross departmental, yet so many things were needed that way. My quick question is, the newsletter project, you alluded to it but maybe you could flesh out how it affected young people, in terms of their self-esteem, in terms of their staying in school, which is such an important thing. Have you been able to track that those involved in the newsletter

project have developed skills and a self-image that allowed them to continue in school, or has it been going long enough to really track that?

MR. SAFER: I would say with some of them - Ammy over here is maybe an example of one who has been involved for quite a while. You're in school?

MS. PURCELL: Yes.

MR. SAFER: And you're attending?

MS. PURCELL: Yes, and I'm doing very good.

MR. SAFER: At the beginning of the year when they enrol, I send a letter to someone at school, either an English teacher, guidance counsellor, principal to let them know they have enrolled in the project, give them a copy of the last newsletter. Then when the new one comes out we send a letter and say, this is their newsletter, this is what they've done, will you please consider giving them some credit? In most cases they do get credit towards their final mark for this project. This year I got some very positive responses from the educators I wrote to, just within the last couple of weeks, principals, guidance counsellors, English teachers, so that's a tangible response.

I don't want to go so far as to say that you can count on youth who are involved in this staying in school, because clearly that's not the case this year. Several of them have lost the connection to school, at least for this year, even while they were involved.

Another way of looking at it is even when that's happening and maybe their placements are changing and everything else is changing, a good number of them have continued to be involved in this. This provides some traction and continuity for them when everything else is falling apart.

MR. PARENT: One last quick question. You talked about how this was for youth, youth at risk, and youth who have been at risk. At what stage, if someone wants to be part of the newsletter project but they are now no longer a youth at risk, how long are they still involved? I'm just wondering, Ammy, are you still classified as a youth at risk, or have you now moved on?

MS. PURCELL: I think I've moved on from "at risk" but it's still good to get our opinion because we did it too, and maybe people who have successfully gone through it, maybe we could help the ones who are going through it and it will be a little more positive for them.

MR. SAFER: I'll just add that the way we have it set up is in the Fall when we start up, and most of the people coming in are referred by social workers, all the spaces initially are for youth who are currently in care, so Ammy had to go on a waiting list last year, in addition to a

few others. Then when all of those people have been in the program and some decide to move on, then the ones who are not in care can come in. The priority is for the ones who are currently in care but so far we've been lucky that we could include all of them. It just means that there are more altogether, there were 18 this year.

MR. PARENT: Thank you.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Gary.

MR. GARY HINES: Mark kind of took my question because it was to Ammy as to why she had chosen to go back or to stay with the program, if it was twofold, that you still benefit from it and you have something you can give back to those who are new. But you pretty well have answered that question.

I'm curious, you made the statement that at one point in time one student left school in Grade 7 and because of age went back and came out of Grade 10. There's something fundamentally wrong with that because I think that child was put in a position where it was somewhat setting her up to fail, to make that big step. That's one of the problems I have with the education system today, because we see peer pressure if you fail to graduate, that they will graduate students who maybe shouldn't go ahead. This seems to be a similar situation but perhaps if that child had gone back into Grade 8 they may be better off today. What do you think of that?

MR. SAFER: I should say in that case there was some home schooling that was taking place in the interim, but I agree with you that it becomes an insurmountable challenge for someone like that. If someone gets involved in other things besides school, let's put it that way, for a couple of years of their young life, and then they realize how important an education is, they really want to do well. This one really wanted to do well and was very promising and very bright.

There are huge barriers for young people in that situation right now and any one of those barriers could be enough to derail them again. That's why it's so important for us to see what we can do. Some of them really have a hard time functioning in a school environment, that's just a fact. What can we do to impart the knowledge and give them the background that they need in order to keep progressing? Maybe some of it could be in school, some of it could be out of school in a community-based setting.

MR. HINES: Where is that individual today?

MR. SAFER: She moved back home and it's hard for me to get hold of her now, it's hard for me to maintain contact with some of these youth.

MR. HINES: One more question. When you were here before, there was a young lady from Cumberland County who was here, who was very bright and a tremendous speaker and so on. Where has she gone, what has happened with her?

MR. SAFER: She's at St. Thomas University.

MR. HINES: Doing well, I presume?

MR. SAFER: Yes.

MR. HINES: Great, good story. Thank you.

MR. SAFER: That's Rebecca Herrett for the record.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Mark, I'm going to ask you to take the Chair if you don't mind.

MR. PARENT: Let's be informal. Just go ahead and ask from there.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Okay, but if I speak too long just remind me that the time is winding down.

MR. PARENT: In light of the Liberals not being here, feel free.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Well, this is such a wonderful opportunity for us to talk to youth who have first-hand experience with the child welfare system. Often because of confidentiality and because many of them are in school when our offices are open, we don't get a chance to talk to people directly. I would like to hear from each of your colleagues who are with you, Andrew, today. I'm really interested in the relationship between the youth and the caseworker.

It's so unfortunate that the quality of that relationship is really undermined by the fact that they have so many young people on their caseload. Quite frankly, we actually get a chance to talk to caseworkers quite a bit and we hear continuously that they're not happy with the situation either, that they feel that they're being swamped with red tape, they're swamped with financial approvals and things like that and they don't have the quality time that they know they need to spend with the young people in their care, so it's very frustrating for them, as well.

Now we have a chance to hear from the people who don't receive the service because of a lack of resources, or a low priority. I'm just wondering if each of you could tell me, thinking back on your own experience and having talked to other young people, both through the newsletter project and other connections, what would you like to change about the system, so that it could have helped you in a better way? If others can learn from what went wrong in your experience, what advice would you have for us in terms of advising the department about the



changes that need to be made, the quality of your experience? What have you learned that really would help us?

MS. PURCELL: There are too many worker switches. I went through three different social workers in one year, so there's no relationship there, so I don't want to ask for anything because I don't know them. There needs to be more consistency with that. I guess that was my big problem, and returning phone calls and whatnot for needs, that definitely needs to improve, definitely.

[3:00 p.m.]

MADAM CHAIRMAN: So if you call because you're upset or you need to know something immediately, it could be a full 24 hours before you hear back. Often the young person is in school, how does the caseworker reach the young person?

MS. PURCELL: With that I actually had an incident where I needed money for a school trip. I called and I left a message and I didn't get a call back for a week, so I missed the trip, which I didn't really mind because I didn't really want to go, but it's still . . .

MADAM CHAIRMAN: If this had been really, really important to you you still would have missed it.

MS. PURCELL: Yes. Where we're in school, they can't call the school and ask and then maybe we go out with the family after, so there's not enough.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: So more speedy responses and more consistency so you can develop a good relationship with a caseworker and be able to continue that.

MS. PURCELL: Yes.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Those are excellent suggestions, thank you. Tony.

MR. TONY BEAUMIER: I got along good with my social worker, actually. She was my social worker for 12 or 13 years.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: And you had the same one, excellent.

MR. BEAUMIER: I understood that sometimes she couldn't call me back that day or the next even because she could have 30 to 35 other people to call back, and it would probably be more important for the other people because I didn't have a lot of big problems anyway.

One time I remember she called me at seven o'clock in the morning from her house because I was going to Antigonish for a soccer tournament. She brought me the money and a

cheque and all that good stuff to my house before I had to leave for the tournament, so she kind of did backflips for me.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: That's just great. Can you think of anything else that might have made your situation a little easier?

MR. BEAUMIER: Just my foster parents, they were always there too. I got along with them good and although I'm out of care now I still talk to my old foster parents and I still talk to her, so we still keep in touch.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: So despite everything that happened, you feel that your experience was more positive than perhaps others?

MR. BEAUMIER: More positive than negative, for sure, yes.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Thank you for sharing that. John, do you have any advice for us or any suggestions as to what could be done to make things different or better?

MR. WALKER: I lived with my mom for the last two years that I was in care and I could never get hold of my social worker, so I just stopped calling her. I don't really talk to her. I talked to her last week and I turned 19 in January and I was supposed to get a birth certificate then and I just got it today. You never can get hold of them, your social worker, it's impossible.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: So in your experience things have been pretty slow in terms of communication. Thank you. And Cyndi.

MS. RAFUSE: Me and my social worker get along pretty good. I have been in care for three or four years and I have had two, so it hasn't been that bad. I'm shy so I don't really open up to people and it's hard to ask for things, or whatever, when you don't really talk to them that often. I think you need to talk to them more than once a week or once a month. I think you should have a say on where you will be placed, because a lot of youth get sent far away and leave their family. I think you should have at least a little bit of say on where you want to go.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: So you're just told what foster care situation or group home you're going to and you're not given any part of the choice?

MS. RAFUSE: Not at all.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: I think you're suggesting that if you had more regular discussions with your caseworker then things might come out in the course of talking about something else, you might be able to share something that might be bothering you.

MS. RAFUSE: Yes, because you'll be more open with them.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Sure. Thank you very much. Okay, perhaps we'll go into round two now.

MR. SAFER: Excuse me. Could I just add one comment about social workers?

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Yes.

MR. SAFER: I think what tends to happen is the squeaky wheel gets the grease. So the youth who are really in crisis and also the ones who are requiring a lot of attention, end up taking quite a bit more time than if you divided 25 or 30 youth up. Certain ones are taking a lot more time, so the ones who are quiet, just like in a class in school, the ones who are quiet might not be involved in what's going on because the other ones are taking up so much time, that's a lot of it.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: That's an important point. A certain percentage of youth in care are actually in the middle of some sort of crisis, so they probably take a lot of the human resources that are available and that really slows it down for everybody else. That's an important point, thank you.

I have Joan and then Jerry.

MS. MASSEY: That's a good connection because we're facing the same problem in the education system. We just actually had the Deputy Minister of Education in here on Tuesday and we were talking about special education and the needs revolving around that, the lack of funding that the province gives to kids in school who need special attention. This is like a mirror reflection only in a different way.

One of the things that came up in this material is the hesitance in having older children in the foster care system. At the age of 16 you can't be in foster care any longer, is that correct? Then you move on to a group home? How does that work?

MR. BEAUMIER: I was in a foster home until I was 19.

MS. PURCELL: It depends on your personal situation.

MS. MASSEY: So people actually can have a foster child until they are 19 but then after that . . .

MS. PURCELL: Right up to 21.

MS. MASSEY: I believe there is a cutoff in the Act, isn't there? Once you're a certain age then . . .

MR. BEAUMIER: When you're 19 you have to go to court and if you're in school or working then the court changes it from permanent to a ward of the court. I was a ward of the court but mine ended when I was 21, so I could have really lived in foster care until I was 21. It all depends on what you're doing after you are 19.

MS. MASSEY: Is there a perception out there though with the general public, if I wanted to be a foster parent that I would prefer - do foster parents prefer to have younger children?

MR. BEAUMIER: Yes.

MS. MASSEY: That's what I'm actually trying to get at, maybe I didn't express myself. So there's that sort of general thing, that people would prefer to have younger children in their care. Because teenagers offer up all those extra lovely things that we all have. I have three boys - two men and a boy I should say now. So there isn't actually an age cut-off then but it's called something else.

MS. PURCELL: It's sort of to do with when you turn 16 if your particular case, I guess, isn't that big, then you get cut off from a social worker and all that funding and whatever. They completely cut me off as soon as I turned 16. I was home but even now I feel I still need a social worker. I had a therapist that I used to go see and I wish I still had that, but they completely cut me off when I turned 16, so that's the age if your case isn't that important.

MS. MASSEY: You mean you are at home with one of your parents?

MS. PURCELL: Yes.

MS. MASSEY: But you still could use some resources that maybe you can't provide by yourself?

MS. PURCELL: Yes.

MS. MASSEY: That's a really good point.

MR. SAFER: You're not in care so there would have to be a vehicle for the services to be . . .

MS. MASSEY: Something in between, like a grey area. Just because you reach a certain age, problems don't end. If you've been in therapy and you feel that you needed more of that, it's a good point.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: The other half of that, Joan, I was just reminded, that if a youth requires protection or some extra services and they haven't been in youth protection before the age of 16, and they're 16 or over, then they can't come into child protection after the

age of 16 as a new case. So there's a huge gap there in terms of needed resources and programs and services, especially between 16 and 19 for the vulnerable.

MS. MASSEY: There is a gap there where there's some resources needed, okay, that's what I thought. There is a need for more foster parents, that's a true statement, because then that would offer up more choices. People were telling us this morning if you're in high school and you want to stay in the high school but you can't stay in that home anymore, then you don't have a lot of choices. They are not offering up well, here are five or six foster homes that you could go into in that boundary of that school. There's a whole process to enter into if you want to go out of bounds for a school too, which is not that easy and you have to do that before a certain date in the school year and what have you, so I imagine that offers up a lot of problems. It must be really hard.

I know, as a parent, you always look at the school system that your children are in, even if they are in Primary and you are thinking of moving to another neighbourhood, you sort of always want to keep them in the same system so that they have the same friends, that you know the friends and you feel comfortable with them and that's a big issue. So I imagine that you really feel that a lot of things are spinning out of your control, that you just don't have the control. That's what I'm hearing, you are always thinking, well, what's going to happen tomorrow or next month or next year. Certainly we are hearing stories where there have been really positive outcomes but then we are hearing some really not so positive outcomes which is very unfortunate.

I know, actually, one of the comments that John had made in one of his articles and I read it in some other articles, it was like a common theme in a couple of those articles, that sometimes children in care don't feel that they are being treated the same way as the biological children in the same home.

MR. SAFER: It came up a few times.

MS. MASSEY: Yes, it did come up. I noticed that it came up more than once, a couple of times. As far as there needing to be more foster parents, I don't know, I guess that's something that the province has to be more proactive in going out and perhaps that has something to do with how much funding is available to these foster parents because I know, reading through this, there were a lot of comments from youth in care that their basic needs are met and they get some clothes for school but there aren't really a lot of resources for extracurricular activities. I know John talked about wanting to play hockey and they actually were going to provide the money for him to get on the team but then where was he going to get the equipment? I know, from having two boys who were in that - thank goodness for only two years - we did shop around and get used equipment, but that's a lot of work for a parent to go out and do that.

In high school - and even in junior high school but mostly in high school - the little things that mean so much to a youth, that they can go out once a week with their buddies or their girlfriends and buy their lunch, go down to a fast food place and get their lunch and go to the movies on the weekends. These small things mean a lot to adults, too, but are even so much more important to youth. People are into fashions. They want to wear certain things, they want to look a certain way. By the sounds of things, they are facing barriers as far as having things like that and extracurricular activities like basketball or soccer or these kinds of things.

I'm just wondering if you can comment on the funding that is available to foster parents and group homes too, because they are talking about the same issues where there is no money in these group homes for video games, Internet, basketball, these sorts of things and they are just sort of stuck there in this group home with nothing to do, nowhere to go, no activities and you know what happens then.

[3:15 p.m.]

MR. SAFER: Yes, more money everywhere. From what I understand, foster parents end up subsidizing, but it costs them more money than what they get and I guess it would be nice if they could break even. But all those examples are really good and they add up, even if it's \$5 here, \$5 there. I don't have the figures of how much they get, I haven't looked into it but I understand that they end up paying more than they get.

MS. MASSEY: Again, similar to the classroom, where classroom teachers are subsidizing the school system right now out of their pockets and I know that first-hand from when I was in the home and school. I know one year we tried to get receipts from the teachers for things that they had bought here and there and we were going to give them some money and, of course, that was nixed, no you can't do that. So then we ended up just every year giving each classroom teacher \$100 to spend how they wanted to get around that but that's a drop in the bucket. So I can imagine these foster parents are really - and there again some might be, some might not be able to financially give this extra money. So I guess then the youth are left going to the social worker and if you don't really have a good relationship because if you are only talking to somebody once every two weeks, I don't know how you can get a real relationship going with that. It's hard enough, as a parent, trying to have a relationship with your kids who are there every day.

MR. SAFER: For some it's actually once a month. Some of the youth in our program are actually from other towns but they are living here, going to school here, so they are in our program. If the worker lives in another town, there is even less contact. At least I'm thinking about one or two cases where they say it's more like once a month.

MS. MASSEY: It's amazing, it really is. It's quite an eye-opener and I think actually today we have gotten even more details and information than the last time you were here

because I think we've had a chance to digest a lot of it and think about it over the course of the time. I really appreciate it.

MR. SAFER: I just wanted to add, the point you were making there about foster parents, it seems like a real disincentive for people to become foster parents, whereas there should be an incentive because we want more of them but we have a disincentive.

MS. MASSEY: So are the numbers kind of stagnant in people coming on board and becoming foster parents, do you know, or have the numbers dropped? I'm assuming they are not going up.

MR. SAFER: I don't have that information. All I have is anecdotal information. There was a girl within our program last year who wanted to stay in Halifax. Her foster mother was moving out of the area. They didn't find a foster home for her at the time so she moved. They are not that easy to come by, particularly, as we were saying before, she was 16 years old or so.

MS. MASSEY: I think, to my knowledge, the numbers aren't actually going down and I would think part of that is because, as we've heard today, youth do need some resources and if people are willing to offer up their homes and their hearts to these youth but they aren't being given the proper resources, it's like anything else. If you don't think you can do the job 100 per cent you are not going to take the job on. I think there are a lot of loving people out there who would be willing to take on this kind of a huge thing as a family but if they don't think that they can be backed up by this government, they are not going to do it. So I think that's what I'm hearing out there. Thank you.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Jerry.

MR. PYE: Andrew, I just want to go on some of the train of thought that my colleague, the member for Dartmouth East, has brought up. I stated earlier that, in fact, it was a matter of resources, be it in Education or wherever. I think the single most important thing that we need to recognize is that youth in care of the Minister of Community Services, regardless if they are in a foster home, a group home or in a temporary setting, have the connect to the person who can immediately address the real serious need that is affecting them.

I think that one of the partnerships that Community Services through Education might want to look at, particularly around education, is the notion that in fact there is money set aside in a budget of Education that will tell the district school board, or the school at which the youth in care is attending, that there are funds available for field trips, for intramural sports and so on, and that that becomes readily available so that there is not this crisis situation of calling on a telephone, ringing up and waiting for someone to call and three or four days pass by and you don't make the event. So I think that that might be, if I can make a recommendation to you, one

of the things that you can set aside in a budget that allows regional school boards to come to the rescue of the individuals in question.

The other thing that I wanted to talk to you about, I'm sure that you are aware of this, and I know and my colleagues know that two years ago, about two and a half years ago really, social workers had produced a handbook on caseload overload. They described some of the very real problems and concerns that they have with respect to trying to address the issue around the overload number of cases that they have to address and many of those are youth in crisis issues as well. I'm wondering, is there a national ratio for the number of youth in care versus caseworkers across the country? Is there one at the Maritime School of Social Work or any other institution across the country or any other educating facility that says here is the appropriate ratio to use when, in fact, you are trying to bring this about?

MR. SAFER: That's a great question. I have to say I do not know the answer to it but I will find out and I will notify Madam Chairman. It's an important thing to know and I don't have the information about a national ratio.

MR. PYE: I also want to say to Tony, you give me the impression - and I can see it - that obviously if there is a very good environment, a safe working environment, an amicable environment between you and your foster parents and your caseworker, that things run smoothly and they run generally very well. I guess you are over 21 now. You are out on your own, I guess?

MR. BEAUMIER: Yes.

MR. PYE: And you do even go back to visit your foster parents and you do have that connect and link with them. That contrasts differently to John and I want to say to you, John, therein lies the significance of supportive needs within the community in a foster home whether one's home with their biological parent or whatever, there needs to be some kind of addressing of that in the Department of Community Services on how to keep that working.

I also want to say that when John was standing at the mic, he indicated that he now has a job. I guess it's a part-time job, or it might be a full-time job but through the assistance of you, there were resumés produced and so on and he put his resumés through and he received employment. Now obviously it is shift work so he does night shift as well but he had indicated that he wanted to go on to community college, I believe. He didn't indicate the career that he wanted but it was something that certainly tweaked me because it indicated to me that here is a gentleman who wanted to further his education but yet has extreme difficulty in communicating with his caseworker at the Department of Community Services and having the resources to help him along.

I'm just wondering, because the individual is 19 years of age, he does have full-time employment, has Community Services closed the door on him now or are there avenues



available for him to continue on through the Employment Support and Income Assistance Program to help him further his education and so on?

Is it available to him through - and I think it is, because at community college it would be a two-year program. So rather than go on with this, can you tell me, are you or anyone else within this agency, able to guide John through that process?

MR. SAFER: It's a great question. John, do you want to explain a little bit about what was said about the program.

MR. WALKER: Like what it's about?

MR. SAFER: Just go up and we'll sort of answer this together. First of all, what is the program you want to do?

MR. WALKER: It's bricklaying but it's not with the community college . . .

MR. PYE: So it's a trade . . .

MR. WALKER: Yes, it's with the union and they just hold it there. It's like six months. I only have my Grade 10, so with this I don't have to have Grade 12 because it's with the union.

MR. SAFER: So your worker said that this is available to you.

MR. WALKER: Yes.

MR. SAFER: There is a bursary through the Nova Scotia Council for the Family called Amanda's Gift. I just gave John the paperwork. He's going to apply for that. He's in a good position. It was set up for people in his situation. As far as income assistance, going through the Department of Community Services on that side, I don't know if you've looked into that. That's something we could maybe start looking into.

MR. PYE: Can I ask what your full-time job is now?

MR. WALKER: Superstore. I work stocking shelves. It's all night shift.

MR. PYE: So it's minimum wage. Uncertain employment is what it is.

MR. WALKER: I've worked a month and a half and I have another month and a half and then that's when they tell me if I'm hired for sure. It's like an orientation program.

MR. PYE: It's a probationary period. In the meantime, though, he will be guided through the avenues that might be available for him to further his career. I made note of that because he had indicated that he had wanted to go to community college and if at all possible,

I would just say here, when I see something like that happening, it's incumbent upon me to make sure that he has at least the avenues or the resources available.

MR. SAFER: Who would you suggest, would I just call any social worker on the income support side at DCS?

MR. PYE: Absolutely and they will put him up with a support worker and set him in motion.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Mark or Gary, do you have any other questions?

MR. HINES: John, you might want to talk to the union, if you are going to take this course through the union because sometimes they will have an assistance program that will help you and offer you employment when it's over and you may have to stick with it . . .

MR. WALKER: Oh yes, that's what it is. If I do the course, I'm guaranteed a job.

MR. HINES: Do you have to make a commitment to stay on a particular job? What I'm saying, there may be some potential employers who would help you through your period of education.

MR. WALKER: I don't know. I know that it's six months and then after it I have to do work but I don't get paid for it. I don't know what that's called.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: We can't record you without being at the mic. Do you mind just repeating what you said?

MR. WALKER: What was the question again?

MR. HINES: The question was have you approached the union or talked to the union if there are any avenues where they may be able to line you up with an employer that will support you through your education period in return for a commitment to work for them for a year or a period of time, because there is some of that the union will help you with.

MR. WALKER: When I'm done the course, then they will employ me. It says right on it that you make something like \$20 an hour and they employ you. It's with Local 1 or something.

MR. HINES: John, I'm proud of you. I think you are on the right track. Stick with it.

MR. WALKER: I am.

MR. PARENT: I just echo what Gary said and what others have mentioned about the youth who are with us today.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: I have a couple more questions. If it's okay with everyone, I will do it from the Chair. Andrew, I will direct this to you but anybody can answer. I was a little concerned when I heard you refer earlier on, I think it was actually during your opening presentation, to the fact that being in school can be a condition of a youth in care being able to stay in the group home where they would currently be living. Can you elaborate on that a little bit? Are you suggesting that if a student has to drop out of school for whatever reason, that their home changes or is no longer available to them?

MR. SAFER: It can. Some of the youth can maybe elaborate further. The main issue is that some group homes don't have any program set up for a youth who is there all day and not in school. I guess they get sent to some place that has something set up to handle youth who are not in school.

[3:30 p.m.]

MADAM CHAIRMAN: So they are transferred to another setting that might have supervision during the day.

MR. SAFER: That is more set up for it. I'm sure there is a good reason for this kind of move and it's not the case with every group home. It's not automatic but they feel that their placement can be jeopardized.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: That's a lot of pressure on a young person going through a crisis at that time, not only losing their school setting but possibly losing the roof over their head and all their friends and the staff that they've connected with. Does anyone know of anybody who had that actually happen to them? (Interruptions) Cyndi?

MS. RAFUSE: There was a girl who lived at my group home and she lived there for two years, she was in permanent care her whole life and they just kicked her out, they didn't find another placement or anything because she was over 16.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: So she dropped out of school, she was older than 16 and she was just put out on her own?

MS. RAFUSE: It was just, bye, they didn't help her find a place, they didn't give her money, they didn't do anything. They closed her file and that was it.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Do you know of any other situations like that?

MS. RAFUSE: No.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: So that's sort of the worst case that you've heard about. Wow, that's pretty shocking. Thank you for sharing that.

The other issue I wanted to talk about is we've been really impressed with the Youth in Care Newsletter initiative, it does wonderful work and the young people who have been involved have really been impressive, but obviously, there are hundreds of youth in care who don't have a similar program. You talked a little bit about expansion. I believe at the first meeting there was another pilot site in the Amherst area. Can you fill us in on what happened to that?

MR. SAFER: I think there were close to 10 youth at the first session and there were three at the last session. A number of them had moved out of the area during the program period, but there was a high rate of attrition there, I'm not sure exactly. There was more travelling time because of the geographic spread, it took in Oxford and so on, that's probably part of it, for them to maintain interest, having to drive for 35 to 45 minutes. I think it's really important for the top management of the agency, the executive director and so on to be very committed to this project. It's not that they personally need to be spending a lot of time, but it has to be tied into the program and I think the reason it's working so well here in Halifax is because it is with the Children's Aid Society of Halifax, it has the support at the top and the total support of the supervisor of Adolescent Services. I think those are all factors. In Amherst there was support, but it was not as integrated as the support here.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: So would you agree that even if it isn't necessarily the same model you're using for the newsletter, that youth in care of the department definitely need these alternatives to enable them to gain extra skills, to bond and work together, to learn and grow and support one another? You don't see any evidence of that happening across the rest of the province with programs like this or different . . .

MR. SAFER: Not that I know of. There are some other excellent programs, Heartwood has some great programs, more intensive weekends and there's some repetition, continuity with their programs. We started talking about the possibility of combining this with Heartwood, as far as the South Shore, western region initiative. We are looking into the possibility of that because Heartwood has the whole outdoor experience and this is more intellectual, so they could be very complementary.

I went to Ottawa to meet with the executive director and research director of the National Youth in Care Network a few months ago. They are interested in the program and seeing what other networks would want to implement it. From my discussions with them, it doesn't appear that there is another program like this in Canada and the other groups are interested in it, but for one reason or another they can't take on anything else at the moment. But they're quite aware of it and I guess that's the long answer to saying there are a number of elements that are coming together here that are working really well. I would love to see an effort going into replicating some of those elements and then adapting to local situations in more rural areas and so on.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: As you know, the three of us actually represent constituencies on the Dartmouth side of the harbour. Has there ever been any talk about expanding your program throughout the metro area?

MR. SAFER: I did have discussions with the ADCRF, the Association for the Development of Children's Residential Facilities, which takes in the group homes in Dartmouth and that was about a year and a half ago. There was interest there but they had other plans at the time. It seems to take a combination of certain circumstances for an agency or organization to be ready for this and have these elements in place where it can actually happen. There are a number of moving parts to this project, it's not just a simple approach.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Just to finish up, I believe at the first meeting that you had with us, one of the youth mentioned - or perhaps you did - it was interesting because the newsletter is being read by a lot of professionals within the child welfare system, and that it's adding to their understanding of what it's like to be a youth in care and hopefully, sensitizing them to some of the situations and issues that arise that perhaps they could be a little more supportive of. Have you any indication from officials within the department that as a result of reading, first-hand, the experiences and understanding the issues and priorities of the youth in care, that anything is changing in the department?

MR. SAFER: That is a great question. I wish I could put my finger on the answer. I will say that Lynn Brogan, the child welfare specialist for the central region, has been very supportive of the project. She distributes the newsletter within the Department of Community Services. This year I gave her 50 copies which she distributed.

Specific feedback, no and we would love to get it. We would love to get some specific feedback from within the department of what difference this is making.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Can I ask the youth with you, have you ever received any feedback from your caseworker or anyone sort of official within the system that they read your story, or your article, or your poem, or saw your drawing? Have you ever heard first-hand or had it recognized that you've been a contributor to the newsletter in any way?

MR. BEAUMIER: From my social worker and foster parents - just them though, no one else. I've given it to my biological mom and people like that and my friends and they're like, that's cool, but that's about it.

MS. PURCELL: My foster parent just basically said, oh, good job and my social worker, oh, good job, but that's it really.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Cyndi, I thought I saw you shaking your head. Has someone seen what you've written and recognized it in any way?

MS. RAFUSE: Yes, with all the different group homes that I went to they all read the newsletter. I was in Truro and all the staff there recognized it. It makes you feel good, even if it's just, oh, good job. And my mom, my social worker and stuff. At the launch there were a lot of people there who talked to the youth.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Did they indicate that they understood your situation any better after having actually read your words?

MS. RAFUSE: No, I don't think they really understood it, maybe a little bit. They still - I don't think they get it.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: But it could be used in that way, to have a better understanding of how you're feeling about life, yourself, and things in general. Okay, thank you. Do any of the committee members have a follow-up question before we ask Andrew and the group to . . .

MS. MASSEY: Something that you had said, Marilyn, and I thought - I didn't know if I was getting another chance. Is there any mechanism in place that the youth in care actually get to evaluate their social workers/foster parents/group home staff? Because what Madam Chairman said got me thinking about that and then I noticed I had written down here that one of the comments, as far as group homes go, was that staff need more training, they can't help youth with family problems or health problems, wait too long, one month, for example, to get something approved when you are in a group home. So it seems like this is the only avenue for these youth to get their feelings and thoughts out but I'm just wondering, is there not a formal mechanism? There has to be, doesn't there?

MR. SAFER: Has anyone here heard of a way to evaluate your foster parent, group home, social worker?

MR. BEAUMIER: That would be a good idea though.

MS. MASSEY: Really, other than talking on the phone to your social worker.

MR. BEAUMIER: I don't think there is except for the newsletter that they can read about what we think about them and stuff like that. Other than that, I don't think there is.

MS. PURCELL: Well, we did have that role-playing thing.

MR. BEAUMIER: That was through the newsletter though.

MR. SAFER: Go ahead and describe that.

MS. PURCELL: We had a role-playing sort of gathering with us and a lot of youth workers and we sort of switched places. Like we were the youth worker and they were the

youth. We pretty much explained to them what they are doing wrong and stuff like that but I don't think it really changed much.

MS. MASSEY: Also, if it never gets to the superiors, I don't know. I'm surprised that there is not because really we are serving you. Whether it be the foster parents or other people, we are there to serve you, the youth in care, aren't we? Because really, that's the way it works. It's the same as teachers and staff within the school system. They are there to serve these students and students and parents have to be able to have, and youth in care should have, a mechanism to voice their concerns in a real formal way.

MR. SAFER: I'm going to pass that idea on to Children's Aid.

MS. MASSEY: Maybe there is something and you just don't know about it.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: So, Andrew, this is a chance for you and the others to sort of summarize, perhaps mention something that we haven't asked about or if you just have any sort of closing thoughts.

MR. SAFER: First of all, I would like to ask my colleagues here if they would like to say anything about the newsletter project itself and what it has done for them or if it has been beneficial or if it has been harmful or anything like that. Does anyone have anything they want to say?

MS. PURCELL: It helped me graduate Grade 9 last year.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Sorry, I missed that, Ammy.

MS. PURCELL: Last year, I was failing English class and where I got extra credit for the newsletter project, I passed. So therefore, I graduated junior high school. So that's definitely really good, the extra credit that you get.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Great. Anybody else want to share their experience about working on the newsletter project?

MR. WALKER: I started in October and I wasn't doing anything at all for my life and now everything is falling into place and I think it's all because of the newsletter. I'm 19 now so this is my last year but I still want to do it next year if I'm able to. I know a couple of people who are in care and I tell them join it. I think everyone should.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Thank you, John.

MR. BEAUMIER: I don't think the newsletter would be where it is today without the help of Andrew. He's more than just a coordinator. He's everyone's friend. He does anything. If you're having a rough time, he'll take you out for a coffee and talk it over with you. He's kind

of like a therapist and everything all in one. He just brings everyone together and everyone gets along. Pretty much, thanks to Andrew, everyone gets along and everyone has fun doing it. So that's why people keep doing it.

[3:45 p.m.]

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Well, that's about as high a tribute as you could give. Thanks, Tony.

Cyndi, did you want to add anything?

MS. RAFUSE: I just want to say that this program, I really enjoyed it. I met a lot of nice people. I learned about grammar and stuff like that and got to meet Andrew and he helped me through some rough times and a lot of the other staff that volunteered were really cool. This program is pretty cool.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Thank you.

MR. SAFER: I thank all of you for those wonderful comments. Along the lines of the discontinuity in their lives and the lack of something consistent, my wife recently pointed something out to me. There's a girl in the program who has been involved for several years and she's had a lot of changes recently with her status, her placement, et cetera, at school, everything else. My wife pointed out that I might be the only person she's in touch with right now through that period and that kinda gets you right here. There is a lot of responsibility with that.

I think the point of the project that is nebulous, that's hard to put your finger on, is this point about it providing a stable and reliable reference point for youth who don't have that in their lives. I think the extent to which we can actually do that and provide that kind of ongoing reference point, one that they can trust, which is a very hard thing for them to do, some of them anyway, that's kind of the secret ingredient of what's needed and then all kinds of doors can open for them and they can start recognizing opportunities because they don't feel like they are under siege all the time. They feel like they can maybe just relax for a little bit and start to get involved with things.

I feel blessed that I have a chance to be doing this and to work with these wonderful people year after year. I hope that the funding gets in place so there is some certainty because what I'm saying is how important that consistency and continuity is but at the same time, I don't know that the program is going to be happening in the Fall so we are really going against that basic principle by not having something more solid in place in terms of funding.

I'll just close by saying I really appreciate all of your interest, your comments, your concern. I look forward to working on all this with you further.



MADAM CHAIRMAN: Thank you. I just want to say on behalf of the committee, we really appreciate you coming here today. I want to say to Ammy, Cyndi, John and Tony that we understand how much courage it would take to come into a strange setting like this and share your experience. We admire you for doing that and we thank you, because unless we can talk first-hand to people like you, we don't fully appreciate or understand some of the struggles that youth in care go through. So for your own sakes and for all those others that you're speaking on behalf of, we really do thank you for coming today.

Andrew, it's interesting, I've mentioned this before but there have been all kinds of resiliency studies done about youth in crisis, especially in North America. The single most important factor seems to be an adult in their lives who provides that unconditional love, caring and support for a number of years during those crisis years and it's obvious that you provide that for many of the youth of our province. We just want to say thank you for being so caring and dedicated. People like you make such a difference in our communities and we fully recognize that.

I'm not sure we really clarified the funding issue so just quickly, do you get a grant from either the department or Children's Aid Society of Halifax? Where does that core operating funding come from?

MR. SAFER: For the last two years it has come through the Canada-Nova Scotia Skills and Learning Framework, which is an interdepartmental group that reviews proposals, and the Department of Community Services is a part of that. It is the Department of Community Services funds but it's coming through the Canada-Nova Scotia Skills and Learning Framework. That's the majority of our funding last year and this year, it's about \$41,000, I believe. We have several other funders of considerably less and those funders have been stable for the last several years. Now we're trying to get corporate funding and we're opening up to other foundations and so on.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: It's not my role to put words in the mouths of my colleagues around this table but I think it would be appropriate for a motion to encourage the Department of Community Services to continue their support for that joint funding and hopefully, provide some long-term stability to your initiative, so I would certainly be open to a motion. Someone has to move it since I can't.

MR. PYE: Not a problem, Madam Chairman, I so move.

MS. MASSEY: I second it.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Is there any discussion? Would all those in favour of the motion please say Aye. Contrary minded, Nay.

The motion is carried.

So we will send a letter in support of your initiative to the department and hopefully that will help in some small way. So again, thank you very much for coming, this has given us a lot of insight and a good reminder of just how few resources are actually going in. It's interesting that the legislation, the policies and everything talk about the best interests of the children and youth being the major decision line for everything. I think we need to remind ourselves that sometimes that's not happening. So speak loudly and often, and thank you very much.

MR. SAFER: Thank you.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: I just want to remind the committee that our next meeting is June 23<sup>rd</sup> and the topic is the IWK Mental Health Services for Youth, and it's from 9:00 a.m. to 11:00 a.m. on that Thursday.

MR. PARENT: And that's the last meeting before the Summer break?

MADAM CHAIRMAN: That's my understanding, yes. I think we still have a couple of more topics but we'll have an organizational meeting in September to confirm the topics for the next several meetings then. Motion to adjourn.

MR. PYE: I so move.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: The meeting is adjourned.

[The committee adjourned at 3:55 p.m.]