

# **HANSARD**

**NOVA SCOTIA HOUSE OF ASSEMBLY**

**STANDING COMMITTEE**

**ON**

**COMMUNITY SERVICES**

**Friday, January 13, 2006**

**Red Chamber**

**Forum on Poverty - Deliberations and Recommendations**

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## **COMMUNITY SERVICES COMMITTEE**

Ms. Marilyn More (Chairman)  
Mr. Mark Parent  
Mr. Gary Hines  
Ms. Judy Streach  
Mr. Jerry Pye  
Mr. Gordon Gosse  
Mr. Stephen McNeil  
Mr. Leo Glavine  
Ms. Diana Whalen

[Mr. Gordon Gosse was replaced by Ms. Michele Raymond.]

In Attendance:

Ms. Mora Stevens  
Legislative Committee Clerk

Ms. Jane Warren  
Private Citizen

Ms. Gayle McIntyre  
Member, Community Advocates Network



**HALIFAX, FRIDAY, JANUARY 13, 2006**

**STANDING COMMITTEE ON COMMUNITY SERVICES**

**3:00 P.M.**

CHAIRMAN  
Ms. Marilyn More

MADAM CHAIRMAN: I know Michele Raymond is in the building but we do have a quorum, so I think perhaps we'll get underway. I just wanted to thank the members of our audience for coming back this afternoon. This is wonderful.

Now, we're going to talk about procedure. What I would like to suggest to the committee members is that I don't really want to see any motions on the table for about half an hour. If we move through this fairly quickly, I will loosen that up. What I would like to hear from each of you is what you think our options are for handling the information and the direction strategies this afternoon before we actually put a motion on the table. Since I haven't had much chance to talk, I'm going to start off. If you don't mind, since our vice-chairman isn't here, I'm going to do it from the Chair. I will not abuse my time nor my position, but if you want, you can just remind me.

I was thinking about this overnight and also over the lunch period, and my suggestion would be that we might have to look at short-, medium- and long-term action around this. I think to preserve the credibility of our committee and the process, that there may be a few specific recommendations that were agreed on - it's overdue that these changes happen and I think it would be quite easy to pull from the discussion three or four or five of those recommendations. I'm thinking things like the messages that we heard most often, that we need to review. It has been five years. We need a review of Employment Support and Income Assistance. There seems to be unanimity around changing the restriction that clients receiving income assistance can't pursue a goal of university, career. Just a few like that that we may want to unanimously support, and that would be our short term. Also, that would give us a chance to get some of those in the Spring budget, or at least to be considered for the Spring budget process.

I'm thinking, in the medium term we might like to make a commitment as a standing committee that we'll stay on top of this issue. So perhaps six or seven months down the road we might do a bit of an accountability report, letting people know the recommendations that we passed along to Community Services, where they stand and just what we're doing and where we see action or inaction, or whatever.

I think those organizations that we're looking at the broad picture and reported to us on the long-term needs, I see some sort of collaboration between the community groups and voluntary sector and government. I have no idea whether we're talking a task force, or whatever name or process that might be the most effective, but I think in the long term could take ownership of the issue and make sure that the different partners are continuing their interest and their support for this issue and that we actually are moving ahead. I know none of us want this to end up on a shelf, as so many of the previous reports have been, and if we invite the critical stakeholders perhaps we'll have some chance of success.

I certainly know that in the voluntary sector we've used that collaborative, sort of coalition method, very, very effectively and I think it could work here. There has to be a group that's looking at the long-term implications to develop an overall provincial strategy that looks at what could happen at the community, the region and the province and I think that's beyond our ability. We don't have the resources as a standing committee to do that although we certainly could stay informed and involved. So there's my option on the table.

Is there someone else who would like to present another model or perhaps another approach? Stephen.

MR. STEPHEN MCNEIL: I agree and like the way that you have approached it. Especially in the short term, it's something where we can make some recommendations right now to the government and then put some medium- and long-term views. I particularly like the idea that as a committee that in six months - hopefully we'll all be invited back in six months - there may be one of those processes in the middle of all this to decide whether we're back or not, but the review, what we put in front of government and whether they have acted and whether anything is moved forward.

I think we should be making recommendations that will provide immediate help. One of the recommendations that I heard was the one that Wayne had brought forward around rent, with your housing allowance, be 85 per cent of the rental market in that particular area. I think that's fair and when you spread it across Nova Scotia, it reflects the diversity of the rents in different regions. It's silly to think that you're going to allot somebody in Annapolis the same amount as somebody in Halifax and think that they're going to be able to rent an apartment for that kind of money. I think when you look at that, every presenter who talked to us over the last

few days also spoke about university, single mothers who were wanting to go back to university, they should be allowed that and why are we cutting it off at two years.

The other thing that I think should be paramount, and I think it's something that we should send a pretty clear message from this committee, is around the appeal process. I think we should seriously look at that and one part, if nothing else, if they change nothing else around that appeal process, I think a 30-day written notice to anyone who's having anything affecting their assistance whatsoever, it should be put in writing and give them 30 days' notice so that gives them a chance to make the appeal if they wish to do that. That's just standard practice, that's just human decency. I think that cutting somebody off the way we're doing it now and them not finding out until the cheque doesn't arrive, you know, there's just a complete lack of respect. I think we should look at some recommendations for short-term measures that we can make right now as a committee.

It was pretty clear to me and I think for all the presenters and I think everybody here, the one long-term goal is a complete review of that department by an independent process - complete. So with those few comments, I'll pass it on.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: I have Jerry next and then Diana.

MR. JERRY PYE: Thank you, Madam Chairman, and I want to say that I concur with my colleagues on the other side of the table. I think that what I want to see is that when we talk about short-term items that we're going to pass forward to the minister, that those short-term items that were expressed to us as a standing committee are items that we know will hit around budget time and we want to make sure that they are items that we can articulate and debate if the government chooses not to debate them during the budgetary process.

I think that's very important and I also want to see a time frame around what you call the medium term and with respect to the long term because I think many of the individuals who made presentations to this committee have recognized that historically they have made basically some of the exact same presentations over the years, and over the years many of these presentations have either been put away, collecting dust, or else completely ignored by government by their recommendations and, therefore, need to have the comfort level when they leave this room today that, in fact, long term doesn't mean three to five years down the road, it means as quickly as possible.

The issue of the task force group, or some group to address this issue, needs to be something that is paramount as well because all the presentations before us indicated that there needs to be a serious overhaul of the way social programs are delivered in this province and if that is the case, it may be that there is a completely new ministry of social services based on what that group finds, or the task force finds, and the quicker we move that up the agenda, the faster it will be. Also we need to make sure that there is something that we can do around

housing. Many people have spoken about a separate entity called the Ministry of Housing or the Minister of Housing and that there is a real need to be able to separate that from Community Services as an entity.

[3:15 p.m.]

There are also some, and I don't know if it's today when we do that or if it's a later date, but through some presentations there have been requests that it should be referred to other governmental departments and/or agencies of government. One in particular, I'm talking about the individual who made a recommendation that nutrition and housing, adequate nutrition, if I can quote him correctly, and adequate housing should be a basic human right and that's something that we might be able to separate and forward off to the Human Rights Commission for their input and consultation. So I think there's another avenue here of where we send some of the presentations and I would recommend that we look at that, Madam Chairman, as well.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: I just want to clarify something before I hand it over to Diana. When I talked about short, medium and long term, I don't see delaying action on any of those. They all start at the same time, but when they might actually have some impact would be in the short term, medium term, long term. My caution - I don't want to mislead anyone - by picking out some of the more obvious changes that are necessary, that might impact on the Spring budget for our short term, that in no way means that we won't deal with the other recommendations.

I think part of our short-term strategy might be to say that we'll set aside a separate meeting to continue our deliberation on those recommendations sometime within the next couple of months, because there are actually recommendations we haven't even seen yet because they're in the written presentations. We have to be careful that we fully understand all the information that has come in. I'd like to add, as part of our short-term plan, the fact that we'll meet again - a separate meeting - on this issue, so just because we highlight a few now to take action on, I don't want anyone to worry that the rest are just going to be discarded. Diana.

MS. DIANA WHALEN: Just a couple of things. Again, I do like your idea of sort of trying to look at time frames, and it gives us a structure in which to feel we can move forward on some things right away and do it in stages and steps. I do like that; I think that helps to bring some clarity to it. On the immediate ones, again our thought and the thoughts I had over lunch primarily were around the budget - what can we do that will impact this year's budget, if anything, and again I think Jerry's idea that, of course, if we've identified them as committee members then we should support them in the estimates process, and be looking for them and speaking to them when it comes back at that time of the budget.

There were many good ideas, as you know, that require some budgetary commitment. The one that I'd like to reference, just now, is the telephone cost, which, as I said yesterday, in

some ways seems like a small thing but it is a tool that's so essential to open up contact with the world, to ensure that you can get employed, that you can be in touch with your children's school, that you're not isolated. I think often - and I know Jerry has a lot of multi-unit buildings, as I do in Clayton Park - we have people who are in there for one reason or another, who are very isolated. You have depression and you have all kinds of other health outcomes that get impacted because people just have no contact with their neighbours, friends and family. The telephone is so important, I think, for the overall connectivity to the community. I think that's just a must in the coming budget, and I'd like to make sure that we have that one flagged as an immediate, doable, achievable change.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Leo, did you want to comment?

MR. LEO GLAVINE: I have just a couple of things. Certainly if we're going to reflect the presentations that have been made - I, as an MLA and as a person, am very much in tune with my riding, and just to demonstrate that, on as many occasions as possible I actually get out to the home. I go visit the home of a social services recipient who is having extreme difficulties, just so that I can make that personal contact and know exactly what they are going through. If our work is going to reflect the heartfelt presentations, the well-documented presentations, I think short term from this committee has to be immediate. The budget is literally being prepared as we speak right now.

The shelter allowance piece has to be there, the telephone, and while I disagree with that whole concept of the clawback and how it's done, I think we should ask for that immediate, again, reduction to 50 per cent with it to be reviewed in its entirety. Moving it down to 50 per cent, I believe, allows for a little bit of light here and the possibility for people, at least when they go out to work - I know in my area, seasonally, if they can make \$700 picking apples and they can own \$350, it's a big improvement over where they are now. The thing about it is it's such a disincentive for people even going out the door when 70 per cent is clawed back. You don't even get half of what you do; half of what you put your sweat into, you don't get back. I think that's a must right now.

The other thing about that that I have seen is that there are many people on provincial assistance who want to be productive citizens and who want to find some work they can do. Very often if they can get back to work - for that one day a week they may get called into a warehouse, boy, they went back, they had a productive day's work, they felt good about it and they brought home some additional help that would be there for their family in terms of the shelter, the food, the requirements and basics of life that they need.

I think those are three pieces we've talked about here that almost all presentations have alluded to. My colleague, Mr. Pye, is absolutely right, and probably Mr. McNeil as well, spoke to the need for a review of this department. If we could get it to function almost immediately as a department of human services, boy, would we ever be making, in this province, a step

forward. When I write my own little personal autobiography of my days as an MLA, some of the stories that will cause me to lose my hair much quicker will be around the pervasive hurt a department, that is supposed to help, causes for people. I hear it week in and week out.

I had one call just today that shows that they are not as sensitive, there is not enough of the social worker concept mentality to how they need to approach. God forbid if they ever individualize a case, boy oh boy, that would be a crime for them to have committed. So that's part of that bigger change that has to go on, a whole shift in the approach, and why we have this department. In the short term - I almost got wound up there, so I'll stop right now - the shelter allowance, the telephone, the clawback, those relate to budget and they have to move forward from this committee. I know Jerry is anxious to wade in on this, because he's been around longer than I have, so, with that, I'll stop.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Do you have another comment?

MR. PYE: I just want to say that if we're starting to categorize those items which should be short term, I think we've heard very clearly on one issue around Pharmacare and drug costs, I would want to see that as one of the components of the short-term recommendations that we make.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Okay, which aspect of the Pharmacare do you . . .

MR. PYE: The need for persons to be able to access drugs, particularly those low-income earners and those persons who may not necessarily be on social assistance, but because someone has determined their budget level or their income level to be such are in absolute dire straits as a result of expending those dollars that would normally be spent on food and nutrition and other things in order for them to continue to have that, to make sure that there's an inclusion of more than the people who are now being served by the Department of Community Services through Pharmacare.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: I think you know that might be a bit broader than specific changes to the current system. We'll come back to it.

MR. PYE: It might be, but I think that we have the resources to narrow that down and to make recommendations after we've looked at it more closely.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Let's just go back to the current situation.

MR. MCNEIL: I wanted to comment on the issue that Leo was talking about, and that is the 50 per cent, changing it from a 70 per cent to a 50 per cent clawback. I'm wondering if we shouldn't entertain the idea that before any clawback that there should be a set amount that someone can earn, whether it be \$200 a month, which is only \$2,400 a year, before there be any clawback.



MS. WHALEN: Similar to the federal program.

MR. MCNEIL: I think that's something we should discuss. I am somewhat concerned to hear that Leo is going to write an autobiography about his time in politics. (Laughter)

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Let's go through the suggestions and just clarify to make sure we understand exactly what we're asking for each of them.

MR. GLAVINE: In terms of how we'll execute each one of these, there is some discussion, and maybe somebody from the esteemed audience who gave us so much input here could also make some comments. I think that's fair game?

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Well, I would like to see the committee come up with a general framework first and then perhaps we could open it up; otherwise, we could be going into this evening and I know some of us have other commitments.

MR. GLAVINE: Okay, sure. So I think looking at the short ones are the budgetary pieces. I think we have three of those on the table now.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: We have six actually. That's why I just wanted to clarify.

MR. GLAVINE: Okay. I was just handed this from one of our presenters that certainly a review of the \$190 personal allowance needs, again, an immediate review, or an immediate escalation there, an increase in the \$190 personal allowance. We know that that has to cover a whole wide range of personal use, and for some people, if they don't do the telephone, remember, if somebody wants to try to keep a telephone just for an emergency, to call an ambulance, whatever, it has to come out of that \$190. So that needs some adjustment here as well.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Okay. So what I'm going to suggest is to go through the individual suggestions that have been made, make sure we're clear on what we're asking for and then by consensus, accept them as a group, and then just move on to medium term. Once we've sort of fleshed out everything then we can come back and perhaps do a motion.

MS. WHALEN: I'm not sure of the six you have there, I know you mentioned the university career option, and I want to make sure that's one of your six.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Yes.

MS. WHALEN: Okay, you've got it. Good.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Okay, so the first one that was mentioned was to request an Employment Support and Income Assistance review. Now I'm trying to remember, who knows

what year that was actually implemented? It was 2001. So it's been five years, so it's a reasonable request.

MS. MORA STEVENS (Legislative Committee Clerk): It was given Royal Assent November 30, 2000.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: All right. Okay, so has everyone agreed that that is one of our short-term requests, we ask for a review, because that will have financial implications, right?

Okay, the next one I've listed is allowing single parents on income assistance the right to apply, to be accepted at a university and stay on income assistance. I mean, both our caucuses have Private Members' Bills in, so we're clear on that one, okay.

The shelter allowance, the amount to reflect regional markets. Is that what you were suggesting, Stephen?

MR. MCNEIL: Tied to 85 per cent of the regional market, the rental market.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Sorry, I missed that when you first said it, 85 per cent of the rental market.

Now the next one, I'm still not quite clear and I would like a little discussion on the appeal process. Stephen, I think you were suggesting the written notice to the client in a timely fashion?

MR. MCNEIL: Yes, as it is right now some clients are being - they only know they are cut off when their cheque doesn't arrive. So there needs to be a process in place where, clearly, the social worker, the department, has to put in writing to the client what the next step is going to be. Give that client an opportunity to appeal, intervene, all those kinds of things. To answer the accusations without being cut off, found guilty, prior to being - I guess it was Jerry who said . . .

MR. PYE: Madam Chairman, the appeal process should and must include the fact that everyone in this country is innocent until proven guilty and therefore ought not to be cut off of any social assistance until after the completion of the appeal process. One would automatically assume that that would be a right in this society to do that. So I want to make sure that there's clarity there. Also with respect to the appeal process, there needs to be the right for persons who are going through an appeal process, around Community Services, to be able to retain the services of an advocate as well, to assist them. So I think there are two approaches that need to be - many people go through the appeal process not knowing or understanding what is absolutely needed of them, and they need to have the resources that are available to them, much the same as government has the resources that are available. I think there's an imbalance here, if in fact we don't do that. I'll just leave it at that.

[3:30 p.m.]

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Okay, and there were two other aspects that came up during the discussion, and one was that decisions made by the appeal board be sent out to the caseworker so they understand what's happening in other regions as well.

MR. MCNEIL: To what Jerry was talking about - putting in place an advocate - that, to me, would be something in the long term.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: I think Jerry was suggesting that they know they have the right to take someone with them, whether it's an MLA or a friend - is that what you meant, Jerry, or did you mean a service?

MR. PYE: I'm sorry if I'm not making myself clear.

MR. MCNEIL: You are. Just let me finish. I understood you completely. The issue, I think, in the short term - listen, there's not a Nova Scotian who knows - I'll tell you, if you ask any Nova Scotian, they would automatically believe that if someone was being cut off social services, they would have been given advance notice. That is just complete common sense. People would believe that. That is a fundamental law. So if we can deal with that immediately - government cannot deny that, that is a simple request. It's not something that's going to - let me finish - add a huge cost to them, so they can't walk away and say it's a money issue. The other issue becomes a money issue; it's one that we need to start putting pressure on. Deal with that fundamental flaw right up front. I think that's what we need to ask for.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: I think what Stephen is suggesting, Jerry, is can we put some of those other aspects of improving the appeal process in our mid-term plan?

MR. PYE: Madam Chairman, I'm receptive to that as long as we recognize that no one should be cut off social assistance until the appeal process has been completed. We need to make sure that is a fundamental part of what you're recommending as well.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Is that all right, Stephen, if we have those two aspects of the appeal process, and anything else would go in our mid-term?

MR. MCNEIL: Yes.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Okay. The next one is the right to have a basic telephone service, I think that's fairly clear. Any comment on that?

The clawback from 70 per cent to 50 per cent, do we want to discuss that a bit to see if we want an actual baseline or how we want to do that? Did you have a comment, Michele?

MS. MICHELE RAYMOND: I just did want to make a comment, and I'm sorry that I've been sort of in and out of this process, so I don't know how much it has been discussed. The recommendations of the Auditor General - his report has just come out in the last two days - and he has reviewed Community Services and there are some fairly strong recommendations, I would say. Have we discussed how that fits in with this?

MADAM CHAIRMAN: No, we haven't. There's a process, because it has been looked at by the Auditor General, where the department will have to report back to the Auditor General's department.

MS. RAYMOND: So we don't want to be doing redundant work here.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: No. I think that's a separate process, although it will eventually tie in with our review of the department, which is part of our long-term plan.

MS. RAYMOND: These are quite strong and broad recommendations that have been brought forward and they are going to be requiring a review, there's no question about it. I just want to be sure that we're strategic with this.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: They are going to be under considerable pressure to deal with that, from his office.

MS. RAYMOND: I do believe.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Now there's the \$190 personal allowance. How do you want to handle that recommendation? (Interruptions) Oh, I am sorry. Yes, the clawback.

MR. GLAVINE: I had made a proposal around a percentage. Stephen talks about a baseline amount, \$200 a month, \$2,400 added a year. Again, that's a huge amount for somebody to get on provincial assistance, to get at least a little basic improvement. Maybe a base amount versus a percentage, or a base amount before anything can be clawed back.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: That might help in a sense, because I can see the government pulling out one of their worst-case scenarios, that someone on social assistance gets one of these \$50,000 call centre jobs - no, seriously - they can keep half of that and stay on social assistance, and they're going to pull out those horror stories as to why they shouldn't do this. If we can build in some reasonable protection for them, I think we're more likely to move this one forward, so do you think the base amount would help?

MR. GLAVINE: I think the proposal of \$200 is a great start and, again, keeps them within the framework of any being clawed back from income tax. So I think that's not a bad start.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: So they can earn \$200 a month?

MR. GLAVINE: Yes, \$200 a month. They could earn up to \$200 a month without any clawback.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: I'm just wondering, though, what the current amount is that they can earn up to . . .

MR. GLAVINE: The 70 per cent is right off. (Interruptions)

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Jane, because you're going to add some factual information, could you come up to the standing mic, so we can get you recorded?

MS. JANE WARREN: CPP disability has just started - well, they just increased it to \$4,100 that you're allowed to earn before you get cut off or cut down on CPP disability, so we could have a provincial matching amount.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: It's \$4,100.

MS. WARREN: Yes, I'm sure it's \$4,100 for CPP disability.

MR. PYE: I'm not sure. I would not want to be quoted.

MS. WARREN: It's \$4,000-something.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Thank you very much, Jane, we appreciate that.

MS. WARREN: And the \$200 a month, with family benefits it used to be if you were single, you could earn \$100 a month. Well, that's too low. That was from the early 1980s. If you had dependants, you could earn \$200 a month. You might want to think about making the single recipient versus the recipient with dependants a different amount that they are able to earn before the clawback starts.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Okay, thank you. Do you want to divide it between single and those with dependants? Jerry.

MR. PYE: Madam Chairman, I'm not so sure that's necessary. I was just thinking about the number and why we arrived at the amount of \$200 versus \$250. We need to have a reason why we arrived at that particular number. I'm not sure that's the amount that is really adequate, \$200 a month, \$250 a month, and then do you start clawing back the 50 per cent after you receive \$250 a month, or whatever, to what level?

We need to really look at numbers and we need to be really sure of what we're doing before we put that kind of thing in place, that kind of a mechanism in place. I do know that my

colleague, Mr. Glavine, had indicated earlier, in some comments this morning, around 50 per cent or 30 per cent or whatever, and I'm sure that if I'm not clear on it, then government may not be clear as to what we're recommending in this process.

MR. GLAVINE: I think a good point has been raised by Madam Chairman, that if we get into percentages they can start to get us to follow the rabbit tracks and will say here's a case where somebody made this amount and if we are only pulling back 50 per cent - the way I looked at it on the \$200, and I know that's a pretty small amount, Jerry, in some ways, but, again, for somebody now receiving \$190 for a month, here's how I looked at it, \$200 is one day's work a week at minimum wage, roughly \$6 times an eight-hour day, \$48 or \$50. There are people who have an opportunity to work one day a week at minimum wage, which they won't go out and do now, but if they could bring that \$50 home for one day of helping to load or unload a truck - I think of TRA down our way and places like that - then they would go and do that.

I think maybe Stephen is right on this one, that if we put a basic amount in versus a percentage, it may have a much better uptake than the percentage factor. So it's basically the equivalent of one day a week at minimum wage.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Do we have consensus then, that we're talking about up to \$200 a month before any clawback?

MR. GLAVINE: One day a week.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: And we're not changing the clawback from 70 per cent at this point, right?

MR. GLAVINE: So you have a base amount that you can earn before there's any clawback.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Then the final one . . .

MR. GLAVINE: Could I add to that? I think if somebody goes out and picks apples for three months, they could earn \$2,000, and that's all they're going to be able to have an opportunity to make for the year. So it's an annual amount of \$2,400.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: So we're actually saying they can earn up to \$2,400 in a year.

MR. GLAVINE: For the year, yes, I forgot to add that in because I think in our area there are so many cases where . . .

MADAM CHAIRMAN: So if it's seasonal work.

MR. GLAVINE: . . . somebody can actually work, go to Blueberry Acres and pick blueberries for two and a half months and they could earn up to \$2,400 a year before there's any clawback. Not everybody gets the opportunity perhaps to work one day a week.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Agreed. So are people agreed that we'll have the annual baseline? Yes, Jerry.

MR. PYE: Madam Chairman, I just wanted to add clarity to the honourable member's comments with respect to how he calculated the number - around about \$200 a month - and I just want to say that if you work an eight-hour day at \$7.10 an hour and the total is \$56.80, \$7.10 and it's going up, and that means that it's closer to \$224. Well, it is actually that, you know. If you look at it over the four-week period, 4.3 weeks in a month, so what you need to do is say but, look, realistically it's \$250 before there's any clawback.

MR. GLAVINE: That's fine, I wasn't a math teacher.

MR. PYE: Nor am I, I'm just fortunate to have the information.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Can we make it \$2,500 then?

MR. PYE: Yes.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Stephen.

MR. MCNEIL: I think we're splitting hairs. I do recognize, you know, the bit amount is a substantial amount to the person who's going to receive it, but bearing in mind you cannot earn a dollar right now without losing 70 per cent of it, I think by moving it to \$200 which I originally suggested, which would be \$2,400 over the year, it is putting it on the table to begin with. It is starting to allow the government to move forward. I think it's an attainable number that they can come forward to. I think if we continue to push this number up, up, up, up, they're going to say (Interruption) Just let me finish, they're going to say you guys are unrealistic, you're out of touch, we can't do it financially. I think if we put this out there now, start it, and then we can work at moving it in subsequent years, but bearing in mind right now that 70 cents of every dollar is taken back.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: So you're suggesting let's make it better and not perfect at this point?

MR. MCNEIL: I think that would be my suggestion, yes.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Do we have agreement on that suggestion? Michele.

MS. RAYMOND: It's giving potentially \$140 extra, am I right? Out of \$200, you would lose \$60, right? You would keep only \$60?

MADAM CHAIRMAN: No, we're saying no.

MS. RAYMOND: You're saying no to that. So in other words, there's \$140 being added on there?

MADAM CHAIRMAN: The clawback only started after they've earned \$2,400.

[3:45 p.m.]

MR. PYE: Madam Chairman, I don't want to belabour this point because we have many other items on the table, but I do think that if we're going to justify this in a realistic way and we're making sure that people get employment opportunities, that they ought not to be penalized for that. I see no reason why we can't justify \$7.10 an hour for the eight-hour day and then \$250 a month. I mean you talk about us splitting hairs. If we're going to split hairs, let's split hairs in a realistic way that's going to be beneficial to those citizens who have come to us with the request today. So I'm open and receptive to \$250.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: So what does that come to - \$3,000? Okay, let's throw out the figure of \$3,000. Can we live with that? Diana.

MS. WHALEN: When I looked at that idea of stopping the clawback or what I think was the good suggestion today, I think coming from Jeanne, was that we look at what the Canada Pension Plan currently does and if you're on disability, you are entitled to earn. I had one case where I thought it was right around \$4,000 a year before you're in any way impacted. I think that has worked very well for that program and it sounds like it's kind of not too much administrative burden in managing that and doing it for an annual basis means you just have to report annually. It wouldn't have that monthly paperwork and control worry unless somebody had a different job, you know, they were transitioning into full-time work. So I think that that's good.

The other thing that strikes me - and some might take exception to it - I would say that this is a no-cost suggestion to the government. What does this cost the government? If I'm on social assistance and I'm discouraged from taking work because I'm going to get a 70 per cent clawback, then I will stay home and continue to get my social assistance because I have been intimidated by this system. If we have an amount up to - and I'm happy to go with \$3,000 per year, if that is the amount I am allowed to earn before there's any clawback,

I have that incentive to begin to, again, get experience and get more confidence in the workforce, transitioning hopefully towards a longer term solution. I think it's a win/win because the person is out legitimately earning that money and being able to keep that first portion anyway for themselves and their family and it's no extra cost to the government.



So that's why I think we don't need to argue about the amount. I mean, I don't think we want it to be overly - like we're not going to say you can earn \$25,000 a year before any clawbacks, but I think within reason that we shouldn't be too concerned about this. It's very reasonable.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: We seem to agree on the principle, it's just the figure amount that we need to put in there. Now I'm hearing \$3,000.

MS. WHALEN: And that is the amount that Mr. Pye has suggested - \$250 a month.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Can everyone live with \$3,000 at this point? Just for the sake of our discussion, \$3,000? Okay.

MS. WARREN: Is that \$3,000 net, or \$3,000 gross?

MS. WHALEN: It has to be gross.

MR. GLAVINE: So that brings it down to \$2,000 or so, where we started.

MS. WHALEN: It has to be.

MR. GLAVINE: Just to add some validity to this - there are four or five major fruit growers in my riding and every year they get local workers, sometimes, obviously, many of them are first-time recipients perhaps of Community Services, and they go to them and the first question, before they pick a single apple, pear or peach, is are you reporting my earnings. That's the first thing, right off. So what are we doing in the Annapolis Valley now? Every major farmer now has foreign workers come in to harvest their crop. I think this could be a truly win/win kind of situation for some areas of the province, especially those that have significant seasonal work.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Before we get too caught up in all these details, we still have two other levels of suggestions to make and we've got two still left in the short term. There's the \$190 personal allowance and the commitment of the standing committee to a full meeting to consider the rest of the recommendations within the next whatever time period. So can we finish those and then move on to medium term? So what about the \$190 personal allowance?

MR. PYE: It's \$194.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Yes, it is, \$194. What was the specific recommendation on that?

MR. GLAVINE: Yes, you know, I guess for me on this particular one, it's one that I haven't studied in terms of being able to say what I feel is the right amount. I certainly have every evidence constantly, weekly, that \$190 does not carry a person through from one month

to the other. There are always deficits somewhere and you see it show up and magnified many times, from December to April in particular when heating comes into the equation. I certainly know that there needs to be an increase here and something that is a mechanism in place that creates a fairer amount year after year, because an increase of this importance should not be left to the whim of any politicians just before an election to make an announcement that you're going to get \$5 or \$10 more. This should be tied to what happens in Nova Scotia in a given year. If we have dramatic increases in some areas, it should be that cost of living kind of reflection that goes into this amount here.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Let's just hear a little more discussion on this and then we can come back, thank you. Michele.

MS. RAYMOND: I was effectively going to say the same thing that Leo has just said because we really are going to keep on going through this discussion. We're looking at a great deal of detail in all of these numbers and unless we make a commitment or unless the government makes a commitment to ensure that those living in poverty - or hopefully not living in poverty, but that Nova Scotians are able to keep up with the cost of living in Nova Scotia; otherwise, we're going to be doing this same thing over and over again and I really do think that looking at inflation rate or cost of living is the only way we are ever going to get over this.

I think it was cited earlier that disability pensions and so on translate, if they had in fact kept up between 1981 and 2001, that people receiving \$714 in 1981, by 2001, which was five years ago, should have been receiving \$1,300-some-odd. You look at those incredible differences, we're probably looking at more like \$1,500, and that's what happens when you don't index.

We know that the costs are escalating without any particular controls. That's the case in terms of shelter allowance. I mean it was recommended two or three years ago that the government should be controlling rents on provincially subsidized rental units. It hasn't happened. The costs are going up. Surely to God the revenue of the people who are having to meet those costs has to be kept at a constant relationship to that.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: I think we all agree and I think the problem is what baseline do we start off with before we tie it to the cost of living increases? Jerry.

MR. PYE: Madam Chairman, is it possible for the committee to entertain some comments from some persons like the Face of Poverty or the Community Advocates Network, someone who tells us what they believe is a reasonable wage? Just simply so that we can have a better handle on how to make the accurate calculation on where we believe the social assistance rates should be?

MADAM CHAIRMAN: It's a good suggestion and I was actually going to ask if anyone knows if any of the reports or presentations that were given to us, actually have done an analysis of what the personal allowances should be. If not, I'm wondering if perhaps this is one that we might move to our mid-term plan, rather than spend a lot more time this afternoon. We recognize it's very important.

MR. PYE: I would agree.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Diana.

MS. WHALEN: I was just going to say, especially if you are moving it, I think the rationale for doing it is clear in one of the reports we got and I think it was the NSGEU one, saying that 62 per cent of the people at our food banks are on social assistance and if that isn't a telling figure, if we know that that's collected by Feed Nova Scotia, we know that the amount that people are getting today is just not enough to go through the month. So if we just used that as the rationale and then we can set a figure, maybe, especially if you're moving it off the immediate, I would just reference that.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Yes, Leo.

MR. GLAVINE: Just to add to that, there are obviously other jurisdictions, maybe some a little better off like Alberta, B.C. and so on, but still, there are other jurisdictions that do a better job with this and for us to do a little bit of a comparative study and do a little bit of our own homework here, or perhaps even the Face of Poverty or one of the other advocacy groups can also send in a little note of recommendation, based on something substantial there that will help us move to a proper level.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Okay, before we leave the short-term goals, two scheduling things. We have committed to a full meeting - well, let's go back to these recommendations. How quickly, Mora, do you think we can have these written up and sent out to the Premier and the Department of Community Services?

MS. STEVENS: We're looking at getting this recommendation session first for the transcript. So a transcript would have to go along with it. I'm writing as I'm getting these recommendations here, so basically, I can send them out Monday, the committee can look at them, we can wait for the transcript. I would say within two weeks.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Can that be our goal, to get these letters out to the Premier and the Department of Community Services within two weeks? Okay.

MS. STEVENS: There is another Community Services meeting scheduled for Thursday, January 26<sup>th</sup>, so we could finalize everything there.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Is there agreement, we'll finalize the letter? Okay, on January 26<sup>th</sup>. Now, what time frame are we talking about committing another full meeting of our standing committee to consider the written information and the rest of the presentations and recommendations? Do you have a suggestion, Mora? We don't have our schedule. Stephen.

MR. MCNEIL: How much time are we talking about in terms of the meeting, an hour, two hours?

MADAM CHAIRMAN: I think we're talking about two hours. I'm not sure how many inches of additional materials have to be read.

MR. MCNEIL: On January 26<sup>th</sup> we have a meeting from 9:00 a.m. until 11:00 a.m. I think we should all look at our schedules and see if it's possible, perhaps on January 26<sup>th</sup>, to meet in the afternoon for a couple of hours. Outside MLAs will be in town, it's a Thursday. We could clean that up that day. The sooner we go through this while some of the presentations are still fresh in our minds and we have a chance to review this that we should do it. If we have to be in town, we might as well work all day, right?

MADAM CHAIRMAN: I can do it in the afternoon. Do others have their schedules here? Thursday, January 26<sup>th</sup>.

MR. MCNEIL: We have a meeting in the morning, and then we could break for lunch and have an afternoon meeting. (Interruptions)

MR. GLAVINE: I'm certainly in favour of that, Madam Chairman.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Okay, let's plan. We're meeting with the Dartmouth Family Resource Centre, I think, between 9:00 a.m. and 11:00 a.m., then we'll break for lunch and perhaps meet from 1:00 p.m. until 3:00 p.m. Jerry.

MR. PYE: Madam Chairman, on the items that we are looking at for immediate resolve, the short-term items, we have identified those and listed them, right? And we have a process whereby we will be forwarding that letter to the Ministry of Community Services. At what particular date? Did we decide?

MADAM CHAIRMAN: And the Premier. We're saying that probably within two weeks we can do that.

MR. PYE: Within two weeks, by January 26<sup>th</sup>. I don't know if this is the appropriate time or not, but there should be a resolution from this committee to the Department of Community Services. Madam Chairman, if I may just pass it by and see if this is the appropriate time to put that resolution forward, so that we at least notify the government that we seriously think there needs to be a complete review of their department.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: That's coming up, Jerry. What I suggested is let's get a consensus on the process we're going to use and the main components of the short-, middle- and long-term plan. That actually has been listed as our long-term, but that means we start it now. It's just going to take longer to achieve.

MR. PYE: Absolutely.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: So I'd rather wait and take motions after we get general agreement, and then we won't have to . . .

MR. PYE: I thought we had already gone through the process of defining what we were going to do, we were going to do the short-term items immediately . . .

MADAM CHAIRMAN: No, we've just done short-term. So medium-term, what do we have here? We have improvements to the appeal process, and nutrition and the right to nutrition and safe, affordable, adequate housing being human rights for Nova Scotians. (Interruptions)

MS. WHALEN: Can I present you with another one, or more?

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Sure.

MS. WHALEN: I must say I have a couple of pages or more of just recommendations that were very key ones that jumped out at me.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Also the personal allowance.

MS. WHALEN: You're still on the personal allowance, that is the medium-term one. That's right, so I have only the one down there. There are so many to get them looking at, but I thought when you mentioned the human resource one, those are ones that are sort of impacting other departments. What about the suggestion, as well, that the Keep the Heat program be transferred to the Community Services Department? (Interruptions) Well, we've said they're having a hard time; nevertheless, it was suggested strongly by the Affordable Energy Coalition - that's what I'm going back to, the Keep the Heat one where the question was asked, why is the Department of Energy doing this when it's really aimed at low-income people, and who would be better equipped to do it?

Now maybe we don't want to give the Community Services Department any more work to do, because they're not entirely having an easy time of it - I won't say anything mean. They seem to be having difficulties, so maybe we don't want to give them more. However, that was a suggestion made.

[4:00 p.m.]

MADAM CHAIRMAN: It was, and I was just thinking, we're not going to have any impact on what's currently happening anyhow, so the recommendation really won't take effect until the next year. Do you want to discuss this one, transferring the Keep the Heat program to the Department of Community Services from the Department of Energy? Any discussion? Michele.

MS. RAYMOND: Again, I wasn't here for the presentation which recommended that, but my inclination would be to say that to the degree that it can be - the Community Services basket is already a pretty big one, and unless the Keep the Heat program is going to be put in terms of a shelter increment or a seasonal shelter increment or something like that, which I wouldn't disagree with, then I would be inclined to say leave it with the Department of Energy. They don't seem to be having too much difficulty with actually determining eligibility, even though they're having trouble with what cheques they issue. (Interruptions)

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Does someone want to summarize the arguments around moving it to the Department of Community Services? Leo.

MR. GLAVINE: Maybe Gayle could give us a little point there that I think is relevant for all of us to hear, just how it's orchestrated and one of the problem areas.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Gayle, do you want to just go to the standing mic, if you don't mind?

MS. GAYLE MCINTYRE: Just recognizing that Michele wasn't here, one of the strong reasons why it was wanting to go over to Community Services is because nobody got notification, and \$7 million is going back into the pot because nobody in Community Services knew. So they thought that if Community Services had it, they would be responsible for a mail-out so that people could have access to the application, and that is the population it's designed for. That's why they thought it would be easier to put it over. (Interruptions)

MADAM CHAIRMAN: No, it's not a motion. Do you want to change your suggestion, and then I'll hear Leo.

MS. WHALEN: I think that clarifies it. The point is that the recipients under Community Services who are eligible were never really notified. It was also suggested they might have been a little bit, almost reluctant in some ways to approach the department, some fear of having it clawed back, I think, was suggested, that if they got this rebate it would be clawed back again. In fact, the cheques are coming from Service Nova Scotia and Municipal Relations, I just realized that. If you call the number on the Keep the Heat program stuff, it will take you to Service Nova Scotia and Municipal Relations. They're probably the right department for doing that, they do most of those kinds of programs.

What I would just say is that we would call upon them in this medium term then to improve it for next year, to ensure that whoever is managing this program does a better job at notifying the people who are most eligible.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Michele, and then Leo.

MS. RAYMOND: I would agree with that. One of the common threads that emerges throughout all this is that there do seem to be some communication difficulties between, well, certainly the Department of Community Services and its clients, but in some cases other departments offering services to those who may happen to also be Community Services clients. I'll bring this up later, but I think that over the medium to long term, we need to be looking at considerably better documentation and publicity of both entitlements and what are known as liabilities, the overpayments and so on, because there is mass confusion around that and that leads to considerable reluctance to approach the department at all.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: And don't forget, as a committee, we'll have more chance to expand and clarify on the medium-term and long-term objectives at our full meeting at the end of January. So we don't have to tidy up that part of our planning process quite as much as we did the initial, in order to get that letter out. Leo.

MR. GLAVINE: I have a comment. This being one of the medium areas that we're looking at, I think there's a couple of things to take a look at. One of the programs that works extremely well in the province, as we all know, is the Good Neighbour Energy Fund. In fact, Nova Scotia Power approached them I think just yesterday - to ask how their handling of that fund goes along so smoothly, because as we all know that when a request goes in, it is very timely. You get the oil, for example, a few days after the request goes in. The electrical side of it, however, is delayed because you only get a bill every two months. So the Good Neighbour Energy Fund says that it's because they don't seem to get all their requests at one time, whereas the heat rebate, thousands go in at one time. So they seem to have a little bit of difficulty or a lot of difficulty with the logistics of getting the rebate back to people.

Which then takes me to how New Brunswick handles this issue, and one whole sector of people who receive the rebate could be looked after, in my view, very smoothly, very easily. That is, in New Brunswick, during the four or five Winter months, they add on \$70 to \$90 per month as a heat supplement. So those people are looked after. Now you would just have your seniors and other low-income people who would be applying for the heat rebate program, which in fact could help Community Services recipients, who in fact very often receiving some on a monthly basis is often better than the one-time \$250 shot.

So I think there are some things that we as a committee need to look at and say, gee, there's a better practice going on somewhere else, let's make that recommendation.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Okay, so why don't we just put in for further discussion at our next meeting - what are we going to call it, energy assistance or something? (Interruption) Okay. That was very helpful, Leo. That kind of information we can toss around and just come up with a more specific recommendation.

I'm just wondering, because it's getting late, if we should just move ahead to the long term so that when we leave here we're somewhat clear on what we're going to be asking in terms of long term. We have review of the Department of Community Services, generally; we want some mechanism so that the voluntary sector and government can partner looking at a lot of these larger issues that have come out of the two-day forum; and the third recommendation we've heard is we are suggesting that we separate out the housing division into a full department so that it can get the attention and focus it needs.

Who wants to start and which of those do you want to pull up first?

MR. PYE: Madam Chairman, there is one more we ought to review on the long term and that's the guaranteed annual income that was suggested, to review it as well. We just add that as one more.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: We have an option. I mean, we have those four general areas. We don't need to make specific suggestions today, but we can discuss it. I would be curious to have just a little bit of discussion around the idea of a task force or some other mechanism to move this forward and who we see the stakeholders as, because I suspect this would be of interest to our audience and it would be nice for them to go home with some sort of idea of where we might be headed, keeping in mind that we can, I suppose, change our mind at the next meeting, but just use a different approach, not renege on our commitment.

MR. PYE: Madam Chairman, around the task force or the committee, whatever it shall be named or titled, is a concern that I have. The concern that I have is because it may not be recognized or acknowledged by government. As you know, in the Kendrick report that was commissioned and authored by the government, it made a recommendation that there be a blue ribbon committee and a panel committee to make recommendation to government on persons with disability and mental health issues. That was one of the very first recommendations of the Kendrick committee report. There were some 47 agencies and organizations that had recommended to government, and there had even been resolutions to government to endorse that recommendation, and government chose not to endorse the recommendation.

What we need to do is make sure that when we make recommendations of a task force or a committee that there is going to be some action by government, that it will listen. I don't know if you enshrine that in a piece of legislation. We do know that the terms of reference would have to be crafted and there would have to be a mission of the organization. But at the end of the day, there needs to be some piece of legislation that says government will



acknowledge them. I don't know how you go about that. It's easy for us to talk about setting up a task force or a committee of organization but, if it doesn't seek approval of government, what's the validity of it? That's a question I have, and it's something that we need to seriously sit back and think about.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: That's a good point. I wonder if there's something we can do to ensure commitment - for example, suggest that each caucus be able to appoint one of their MLAs to the committee, add that sort of political arm of it as well.

MR. MCNEIL: What are you hoping to accomplish by the committee?

MADAM CHAIRMAN: A couple of things. The suggestion has come up that we're going to need a comprehensive cross-section action group in order to move ahead on these. We probably had 100 recommendations and they probably fit into broad categories, but somehow there has to be some collaboration to keep moving forward on those issues, so that five years down the road we're not sitting back in this room talking about the same state of affairs. We have to build ownership of the three - the political arm, the departments, and the voluntary sector, in working together. I guess it's some kind of working partnership to move forward on these broad issues.

MR. MCNEIL: That's a bit different than what I understood the Kendrick report did and what groups are saying. They were telling the government that this is the direction you need to go in, and this is how you're going to get here. What you're suggesting, by what you just said - if I understand you correctly - is that we're going to try to bring together all of the groups that are dealing with this issue, government, non-government, non-profit, coming together to try to put a collaborative effort and direction we go in and how we can best use all of the resources that are presently being used to benefit Nova Scotians.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: That's an approach. I'm not stamping it on the committee as something you have to do.

MR. MCNEIL: I think it's the only one that will work, quite frankly. Jerry quoted one study. I'm sure someone in this room could quote another study. Study after study have told governments this is what you should do, and governments will do what they want to do - and they would do it if we were there, let's be honest, let's not just blame other governments. I think the idea of coming together - and the word used today was an "accord" between the department and the voluntary sector to bring everybody together in a collaborative effort - this is what I'm doing, this is what they're doing, are we overlapping, is there a way we can connect, is there a way we can do it, what can government do, and how can we work together to make this a workable solution for everybody.

I'm just going to bring it back to what I've been faced with in my riding. When somebody who has had problems with the Department of Community Services walks in my

door, some of the recommendations that we've talked about that will have an immediate impact on them, and that is dealing with the shelter allowance, dealing with the telephone, dealing with the process to a certain extent, the university issue - those are the things that, if we can move that ball forward, will have an immediate impact on the people I represent, the people you represent, and all Nova Scotians.

[4:15 p.m.]

In the long term, I heard loud and clear the only thing this committee should be pushing for is a complete review of the Department of Community Services. We can sit here and have 105 different reports put in front of us, but if what we're sending them to is dysfunctional, what's the purpose? The long-term goal should be - and it can't be us, it needs to be somebody who can step in as an independent person who looks at the department - one of the recommendations may be the department of housing needs to stand alone, it needs to be set aside, it's a completely different issue than what we believe the Community Services Department should be dealing with.

I think I'd be cautious in putting together another committee to study it. I could . . .

MADAM CHAIRMAN: No, I'm not . . .

MR. MCNEIL: I know you're not, I know, but I think it has been bantered around. I could look at the idea of bringing together all the groups and maybe say this is what I'm doing and we're not going to overlap, this is how what we're doing helps. But, truly, to make a major difference for everybody, all Nova Scotians, and the bottom line of the province, the department needs to be completely overhauled and reviewed. That's what we've been hearing, and that should be a long-term goal of this committee, to continue to push for that.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Exactly, but I think part of the problem is - I mean we could sit here and play the blame game, but we need to get the buy-in from the government and from department officials themselves. Quite frankly, the state that impoverished Nova Scotians find themselves in is a shared responsibility. You can't blame any individual, organization, any particular government, it's evolved to this point. I guess I think of the model - you know what happens in a country when they're at war, suddenly partisanship goes by the side and everybody works together because they want to achieve something.

Well, I think that in Nova Scotia, obviously from what we've heard, we're in a terrible state and we need a combined collaborative effort across all parties, across departments, across the voluntary sector, the business world, everyone, to finally come to grips with this and to say this isn't fair, we need to do something, so let's work together and change it.

Now, certainly the review of the department is an important part of that, because there are so many things that can be done better and differently. I'm like you, Stephen, I get so

frustrated. Sometimes I spend two and three hours a day on a particular case, and I'm thinking, my heavens, if there was some small policy change that would impact positively on hundreds of people, instead of me, each day, spending time, case by case, individual by individual, when I know it's the broader public policy level that needs to change, and the department mindset, and goals and directions.

So we're isolated in our constituency offices doing this casework, which is so important and means the world to these individuals and their families, but in the long term making life better for one person isn't going to impact on everybody else. We're hearing that when there's an appeal process, the decisions aren't even publicized among the caseworkers and the supervisors. We're all working sort of in these parallel structures and somehow we have to break that down. This is a huge issue. We have to look at things in a different way and work in a different manner, I think, to get forward. I think you and I are talking the same language. Jerry.

MR. PYE: Madam Chairman, I think that when the presenter, Lucille Harper, from Women's Centres CONNECT!, made the presentation and brought forward the notion of a committee, her intent was to have a committee up and functioning so that when there was a complete review of the social services Act that they could be an active participant in looking at that review and making recommendations and suggestions. I don't know if the appropriate avenue for a task force on the review of the Department of Community Services would be through the Voluntary Planning process or not. I don't know if we could ask Voluntary Planning, much the same as they did the ATV reviews and so on, to select a task force to review social services in the Province of Nova Scotia, or social programs.

If we can do that, that might be one of the mechanisms by which we are able to establish this committee to do exactly what the agencies and organizations and presenters before us today actually envisage happening. I'm wondering - I throw that to you - is it possible for this committee to make recommendation to the Voluntary Planning Committee to look at something like that?

MADAM CHAIRMAN: I don't know how people are appointed to Voluntary Planning. I don't know if it's a non-partisan, open process.

MR. PYE: The government assigns it to Voluntary Planning. We can recommend that government assign this.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: That's a good suggestion. Diana.

MS. WHALEN: Actually I'd like to support that. And just a few comments. They're doing a heritage strategy right now, and I know when they set up the group for that - there's 12 or 16, something like that, on the committee, and they strike a new committee depending on what they're studying, so in this case they advertise. They've got people applying for those

roles and then those people go right across the province getting information and they have a formula they use. They did it with the ATVs, now they're doing it with heritage. If they were to do it with say a mandate of looking at an anti-poverty strategy, for example, if that was their goal, we would say to the government we would like you to develop an anti-poverty strategy and we're suggesting you do it through the Voluntary Planning Board.

The important thing there is that Voluntary Planning has resources. They're government resourced. There is some staff there and the assistance for gathering and doing all the data collation and collection, but they are volunteers who step forward for that initiative. So really many of the people we've heard from today would be the sort of people I would think who might volunteer to be part of it. Many others would be giving presentations to that board and then from that would come a comprehensive report with recommendations such as we saw on the ATVs. So I think a good part of it is that there are resources that would help a group like that move forward.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Thank you. Michele.

MS. RAYMOND: The single thing that I would say and I would actually really endorse this, I think that the Voluntary Planning model is a good one. When I was first thinking about the thing with the ATVs, of course, there was no apparent time limit with the establishment of the task force in which action should be taken. So the ATV task force report came out and most of its recommendations, or many of its recommendations were already stale and time passed before it actually came to the Legislature. So I think we should not only ask for a task force report, but also a commitment, a legislative requirement in fact, that its recommendations be brought to the Legislature by x number of months from the delivery of the report. In other words, just keep it steadily moving forward.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Since I've been so vocal this afternoon, I only have one concern about that process. In a way the advantage is that they would actually go out to the communities so more people could take part in the consultation, but the disadvantage is it's really going to repeat what the past studies have done and what we've done over the last two days and they would not be tasked with taking action on those recommendations which I think is part of where we would like to be in the next several months. We would like to have a group that's actually going to be working to move these forward - not studying them again. So that would be my only concern. Jerry.

MR. PYE: Madam Chairman, again, it's a legitimate concern, but I don't know how we structure something that's going to bring it back any quicker. Excuse me for saying so. We can make recommendation, but if the committee has no validity, it has no teeth and then, you know, it's a recommendation of ours, government doesn't acknowledge it. In this particular process it goes through government and government must recommend it to Voluntary Planning. I don't know what authority or what role we have as a Standing Committee on Community Services to

make recommendation to select a committee of government or a committee that's going to report to government.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Yes, I guess part of my original proposal was that this isn't just a government or a government-appointed committee, that we bring in the voluntary sector, and there actually be a continuing role for our standing committee as well. Otherwise, then government is fully in charge of when they start this process, when they report, whether or not they even act on the recommendations. So there could be a two-year delay and I'm not sure people who are hurting every day now want to wait two years for any relief. So I just throw that caution out. I'm not familiar enough with other forms of study or action. I don't know what models have been used in the past. Michele.

MS. RAYMOND: The short- and medium-term recommendations that this committee is bringing forward as a result of all the witnesses who have come in the last two days, those recommendations are going to be brought to the Legislature, are they, or where do they go from here?

MADAM CHAIRMAN: The six that we've talked about and will be voting on shortly, they're going to be put in a letter to the Premier and the Minister of Community Services within the next two weeks.

MS. RAYMOND: With the request that these become amendments to the Act or what?

MADAM CHAIRMAN: No, that they be built into the budgeting process this Spring.

MS. RAYMOND: Okay.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: And then we have committed to meet in the afternoon of Thursday, January 26<sup>th</sup>, to consider the rest of the recommendations and further talk about our medium-term objectives and finalize our long-term objectives. So I mean we can leave the medium- and long-term ones a bit loose and give it some thought and discussion. We can talk to our own caucuses, you know, do a little bit of research and homework and perhaps come back to our next meeting with some suggestions. We don't have to finalize that. The only part today that would be good to have a motion on would be the specific recommendations that we're sending. Diana.

MS. WHALEN: I think you're talking specifically about the short-term recommendations.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Yes.

MS. WHALEN: I would like to propose another one if we could. There are just so many important ones, but there's another one I would like to throw in the mix there, making it

number seven, and that would be that the department reinstate what they had before. There used to be a kind of emergency fund that the caseworkers could look to in the cases that we heard of, and a couple of examples were given in different presentations, but the case where a family in trouble financially is about to become a Community Services client, but if they had a little bit of help, they could move to Halifax or move somewhere and have a job.

What they need is emergency funding or transitional funding for a month maybe, or for a move to the city, and then they have a job and what we were told is that people are told to go to a shelter, there's nothing. In fact, as I said, I had run into that with a constituency issue as well. They simply don't have funding there and there's no flexibility. I had called the director, Gary Porter, who is the director for the entire region here and he said there is no such fund like that. I think it's important because I think having a fund in place and allowing those caseworkers to use their best judgment, there are a lot of times when that money would be so much better spent than allowing people to either lose opportunities and fall between the cracks or end up in shelters. So I think we need to reinstate what they had before which was some sort of discretionary fund for the department.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: This is for non-clients? This is to keep people from being forced onto . . .

MS. WHALEN: Well, both, it could be a client who's transitioning into something else maybe. The case I had was a young woman who was a client of the department, but the minute she got accepted at Saint Mary's University, she was cut off and this was August. She needed to get into her apartment, get ready for university, and it was August, but they wouldn't give her any money. She had no money coming in until her student loan came in, that would be late September. So where's the emergency fund? She was this close to just giving up the university, giving up everything, and just becoming a long-term social assistance client because she was doing so much and just getting nowhere. If she had had help for a month, that would have transitioned her into university in this case. It could be transitioning to a job. It could have been transitioning to something else.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Okay, just refresh my memory. Did this come up as a recommendation in the last two days?

MS. WHALEN: Yes, it was mentioned and the case given, I forget who brought it forward, but it was the social worker who works with Adsum House. She said that she had helped a couple who found themselves without work and the father could move to Halifax. Do you remember that one? Yes. Then they move them up with no furniture.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Any further discussion on this one? (Interruption)

MS. WHALEN: But just in discussion earlier somebody told me that there was, you know, a few years ago they used to have some discretionary fund that they could use in those

cases. Now they're left with nothing and I think it's unfair to the workers as well because the people working in Community Services don't have the necessary tools for the conditions. They know they're going to meet situations like that and they're not given any ability, any resource to turn to. So they also have a rough time because they've got to say no.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Jerry.

[4:30 p.m.]

MR. PYE: As you know, that emergency fund was deemed to have been clawed back after they received that funding, the short term, and we ought to say that that emergency fund ought to be a separate fund excluding the clawback of the emergency.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: So it's not charged as an overpayment.

MR. PYE: And not be charged as an overpayment.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Okay.

MR. PYE: An exceptional fund is probably . . .

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Yes.

MS. WHALEN: And, again, I think that that's good economics because in the long run you're saving a lot of money by helping people just in that one period of time.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Okay, where do we want to go from here?

MR. PYE: Madam Chairman, back to the group. Have we defined or clarified our position with respect of the setting up of the committee that was recommended?

MADAM CHAIRMAN: No, but we have the option of dealing with the middle - and long-term ones at the next meeting, so we don't have to finalize those.

MR. PYE: Certainly, excellent, that's good.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: We do have to move a motion and vote on these seven recommendations that we're going to send within the next two weeks. It would be good to have a motion just suggesting that we've agreed to the process of taking - we're going to have middle- and long-term objectives and we'll finalize those at the next meeting, or if there is consensus on that, that's fine. We'll do a little more homework on what process might be the best in terms of moving the rest of the recommendations forward. I think we have agreement that we're eventually looking at a review of the department; that we want to look more at

guaranteed annual income; the possibility of separating out the housing division; and some way of moving the action forward, however that turns out.

MR. GLAVINE: One of the strong ones that came forward was a look at the minimum wage. There are others that may be in correspondence and presentations as well, that will be part of that whole picture, I guess.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Yes. Where do you want to put the minimum wage? Thank you for that, because that was a major theme.

MR. GLAVINE: The minimum wage should be certainly - there is an increase coming April 1<sup>st</sup>? Yes, so therefore we should be putting that into the mid-term group.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Sure.

MS. RAYMOND: We should perhaps be writing to the Department of Environment and Labour as well, because minimum wage isn't going to fall into Community Services, but we should be writing to the minister.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: No, we realize many of them come under . . .

MS. RAYMOND: Okay, so we're not breaking these . . .

MADAM CHAIRMAN: No. We are not just looking at the Department of Community Services, but that's going to be part of our discussion at the next meeting.

Okay, so are people comfortable with the seven immediate recommendations? Can we have a joint mover? Stephen and Jerry have jointly moved.

MR. PYE: So we're jointly moving to forward the seven immediate recommendations to the Department of Community Services and the Premier.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Within two weeks.

MR. PYE: Yes, because on the revamping of social services, I would like to put a separate resolution through this committee on that.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Okay, well, let's deal with this one.

MR. PYE: Sure. So agreed.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Mora, what do you have there for the motion?



MS. STEVENS: The motion is to write within two weeks and forward the seven short-term - what we have deemed as short-term - immediate recommendations to both the Minister of Community Services and to the Premier. Would you like me to read those seven . .

MADAM CHAIRMAN: . . . for inclusion within this Spring's budget.

MS. STEVENS: Yes, okay.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Do we have a seconder?

MR. GLAVINE: I'll second it.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Thank you. Any discussion on the motion?

MS. RAYMOND: Could I hear the seven recommendations, just on principle.

MS. STEVENS: The first one is a review of the Employment Support and Income Assistance Act. No. 2 is allowing single parents on income assistance to apply for university. These are just the basic ones, I'll pretty up all the words, don't worry. No. 3 is housing allowance to be around 85 per cent of the rental market in the area that people are applying for. No. 4 is the need for an appeal process that has a 30-day written notice of any and all changes in assistance to the client.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: No cuts until the appeal process has been completed.

MS. STEVENS: Yes, that's right. Okay, I'll have to add that. Right to a basic telephone service was No. 5. No. 6 was the wage reduction, move it to a baseline amount of \$250 per month or \$3,000 per year. That's gross income. No. 7 was that the Department of Community Services reinstate the old emergency fund that can be accessed by caseworkers in case of emergencies for transitional funds.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: And not be considered overpayments.

MS. STEVENS: Yes. This would be a separate fund excluding payback, as an exception, it would not be clawed back.

MS. RAYMOND: Available to people who are not otherwise ESIA clients . . .

MADAM CHAIRMAN: And we included clients as well on an exceptional basis. Leo.

MR. GLAVINE: There may be a little bit of clarification needed around the appeal process, in that Gayle has informed me that recipients are notified that they have 30 days to appeal; however, what tends to happen is it gets out late and so on and they are cut off, so what

they need to have is the appeal before they are cut off. Isn't that right? Gayle has first-hand knowledge of this.

MS. MCINTYRE: Sorry, not to second guess you. I'm so pleased it's being discussed. I may not have been clear and I take that responsibility. The concern is that technically there is a policy that says you must give the person 30 days' notice that they're going to be cut off and the concern was, as Jerry has put it so well, that's a guilty before you're proven guilty philosophy and the point is, what's happening in reality, a lot of clients are not even getting that in the mail, so they don't know that they're even getting the warning. Then what happens is there is a fight between the client and the caseworker and that's where it becomes retaliatory, because some caseworkers don't send you the notice and so what we really wanted to put in place is to make sure it's mandatory and that there's proof that you mailed it out, but more importantly we would prefer that you don't do that in the first place and have the appeal process first before you are even cut off. I just wanted to clarify that.

MR. GLAVINE: Thank you.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Okay, we may need some help with the wording of that. So we are suggesting mandatory notice of any change in . . .

MR. GLAVINE: Mandatory notice and an ability to appeal before being cut off assistance.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Right, and don't forget Mora always sends around a copy of the letter. So we'll have another chance to sort of proof it and edit it before it's signed. I wonder if we'll all sign it since we're not all here, or if I will just sign it on behalf of the committee? Okay, Jerry.

MR. PYE: Madam Chairman, as we had recommended, one of the short-term items would be the review of the Employment Support and Income Assistance Act, and I just want to make it clear that we say that there be an independent review, that the review not be done internally by the department, that it be an independent review, and that was where I was going to make the resolution, but since you've already included that part of the short-term recommendations, there is no need to make a separate resolution on it.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: So is there any further discussion on the motion? Are you ready for the question?

Would all those in favour of the motion please say Aye. Contrary minded, Nay.

The motion is carried.

So can we leave it that we have general consensus that at the next meeting we're going to discuss a bit more our middle-term and long-range options, but that generally where we're headed is a review of the department? Some sort of mechanism by which we can help move these actions forward, separating out the housing division and a guaranteed annual income. Diana.

MS. WHALEN: I like those that you've just articulated and we'll go into them in more detail, but I thought before we close today, it would be important to indicate and I'm sure, you can correct me if I'm not reflecting your views, but the idea of having this action committee or task force or however we structure our working together with the community advocates, we've called it long term, but I think our intent is to deal with it quickly, it's just that it would have a longer term mandate and relationship, but I don't want anybody to think that we're saying, oh sometime in the long term we'll establish this.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: No, I think we intend to get these all started in a relatively short period of time. It's just that it's going to take longer to accomplish some of them than others.

MS. WHALEN: That's right because I certainly share that view with you, that we need to work on the momentum of what has happened in the last two days and because that suggestion has come from one of the presenters, I think it's really a very positive one that we work together with the groups.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: So before we break, I want to extend some thank yous: to the Legislative Television and Recording group, Jim MacInnes, Paul Read, William Hirtle, Blake Ross and Kirk Dexter; Hansard Reporting Services, Bob Kinsman and the staff of Hansard, especially the editor, Rhonda Neatt, thank you, Rhonda; House of Assembly Operations staff, Michael Laffin, coordinator, and Maggie MacIntyre; the Legislative Library, Margaret Murphy; especially to our hard-working committee clerk, Mora Stevens, thank you very much; and a special thank you to the committee members. I have really appreciated your presence here the last two days and how seriously you've taken these issues.

I know you share my concern because we've talked about this many, many times. I think we've done yeoman service and I just want to say that I really, really appreciate your efforts.

To those who are still in our audience, I can't tell you how much I admire your patience and your passion on this issue. It's fantastic that many of you have sat here for the full two days. You've been our inspiration and I want to thank you so much for the work you're doing in your communities and our hats are off to you. So thank you so much. (Applause)

MR. GLAVINE: Can I just add one small comment. One of the other things is that if some of these recommendations do, don't, or some variance of, arrive in the Legislature in the

Spring, if we have a Spring session, it's very important for your groups and all of the others who were here, get the word out that your presence here when, for example, we debate the estimates on the budget for Community Services, that's when we can really challenge the government. So make sure you have some presence here. It's a great opportunity for you to have some media to advance your cause as well.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: The forum is adjourned. Thank you.

[The committee adjourned at 4:43 p.m.]