

HANSARD

NOVA SCOTIA HOUSE OF ASSEMBLY

STANDING COMMITTEE

ON

COMMUNITY SERVICES

Thursday, January 26, 2006

Committee Room 1

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.]

[Mr. Leo Glavine was replaced by Mr. Harold Theriault.]

In Attendance:

Ms. Mora Stevens
Legislative Committee Clerk

Also in Attendance:

Ms. Carolyn Earle
Face of Poverty

Ms. Elizabeth Brown
Face of Poverty



HALIFAX, THURSDAY, JANUARY 26, 2006

STANDING COMMITTEE ON COMMUNITY SERVICES

1:00 P.M.

CHAIR
Marilyn More

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Good morning, I would like to call the Standing Committee on Community Services to order. As you know, we are going to continue our deliberations on the recommendations and strategies coming out of the Forum on Poverty. Perhaps we will go around and introduce ourselves. I am expecting Michele Raymond to join us but she is obviously running a little late.

[The committee members introduced themselves.]

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Thank you. We are very pleased to welcome back two of the participants in the forum. We have Carolyn Earle and Elizabeth Brown with us this afternoon from the Face of Poverty consultation. Welcome back, and thank you very much for coming.

Okay, we have to decide on how we are going to handle our discussion this afternoon. I wonder if I could just try to quickly summarize where we left our deliberations the afternoon of the second day. What we tried to do was group some of the common themes and those recommendations that seem to be repeated most often together in, I think it was seven recommendations that we thought perhaps we could move forward in terms of unanimous motion from the committee to both the Premier and the Minister of Community Services, and that is the content of the draft letter. The first version you saw this morning. There is a second draft of the letter available this afternoon. We won't go into the individual items at this moment but, generally, that is where those key recommendations found themselves. Then we realized that there were some medium-term and long-term recommendations that would take longer to implement and to study. I think they were going to be the gist of today's deliberations, and those are presented in a draft pulled out of the Hansard that says medium-term and long-term.

We spent some time trying to decide if there was a current mechanism in government whereby the interests of this committee regarding this issue and the voluntary sector groups could find a home so that continuing homework and action and research and whatnot could happen in an orderly and timely manner. We talked about several models. We talked about the Voluntary Planning process. I'm not sure whether we might have even talked about setting up a subcommittee of our standing committee, and we didn't resolve that because each of them seem to have advantages and disadvantages. The whole question of resources, human and financial, was raised as well. So I think we probably want to continue some of that discussion this afternoon.

Some provinces have what they call a social planning council, which is a semi-autonomous body that we could refer some of this discussion to and they would do further research and come up with more detailed recommendations to government, but we don't have that particular model in Nova Scotia.

Does anyone have any suggestions, or any questions before we start, in terms of how we might decide on a process this afternoon? Do you want to look at the letter which we hope to sign today and actually send on first, and at least we can get that done? I will just give you a couple of minutes to read over the second draft.

MS. MORA STEVENS (Legislative Committee Clerk): Just to remind committee members at the forum, the letter is to go to the Minister of Community Services and the Premier. This is just the one to the Minister of Community Services. It would be basically the same letter, just addressed to the Premier. So we're just sort of editing both at the same time.

MR. MARK PARENT: Just a question on language. On No. 5, on the medium-term, proper notification process of . . .

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Okay, we're actually just dealing with the short-term recommendations in the letter at this moment.

MR. PARENT: Oh, okay. Sorry.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Has everyone had a chance to read the letter?

Okay, I'm starting a speaking list. Jerry.

MR. JERRY PYE: Madam Chairman, just on No. 4, around written notice, around the appeal process. I thought that we had talked about or a number of presenters talked to us about, this innocent until proven guilty process that takes place whereby people are automatically cut off social assistance with very short notice. We should write within that No. 4 something that states that there shall be no cut in social assistance payments until after the decision of the

appeal board has been made. I think then there's justification and there's reason for the cut in the assistance to the client if it's deemed appropriate by the appeal tribunal. But I don't think that we should carry out a process or be a partner to a process that does not give the client the benefit of a doubt first.

[1:15 p.m.]

MADAM CHAIRMAN: That was clearly in the original recommendation.

MR. PYE: That's right. I think we should spell that out in No. 4.

MS. MICHELE RAYMOND: I think it's still there, saying a mandatory notice and appeal before any changes made to the social assistance.

MR. PYE: That's only on appeal process. That's only on the process, that's not on the person's allotment from the Department of Community Services.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: What if we just said appeal results or appeal decision?

MR. PYE: That's right.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Can we just add "decision"? Or do you think it needs a separate sentence?

MR. PYE: I think it needs a separate sentence; we need to clearly spell out what we're saying here.

MS. RAYMOND: What you need to say is that no changes to the client's social assistance may be made before notice has been served and an appeal decision has been reached.

MR. PYE: Absolutely. That's the phrase.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Is that everyone's clear understanding? There were two aspects to that particular recommendation.

MR. PARENT: Can I raise a question I have here?

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Sure.

MR. PARENT: I'm not in disagreement. My concern is - and it's the same concern I have with Nova Scotia Power that I raised on the Thursday; that is that Nova Scotia Power at times has allowed constituents of mine to be in default to such an amount that when I ask what do you owe Nova Scotia Power, the answer is it's \$1,000. It's impossible for them to make it

up. I wouldn't want us to do the same thing here if the appeal came back and said it's an overpayment.

There is a real issue here, and it's compounded by the longer the period you make if there is an overpayment, the more burden you're going to place on that person if they have to pay it back. I'm just raising that - I don't know what the answer is - and I raise it because in Nova Scotia Power I continue to have it. They'll say \$1,000 and I go, oh, I'll phone up Nova Scotia Power, why when they're not getting the trouble at the start, alert them, alert me, alert somebody. I can't raise \$1,000 for them, but I could raise a couple of hundred dollars.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: But I understand there's a timeline that goes with the appeal process, so it would certainly encourage the department to keep the timeline.

MR. PARENT: I just raise it as an issue. I don't know what the answer is, but I think it's a valid issue.

MS. JUDY STREATCH: So, Madam Chairman, the timeline will prevent that overpayment and that burden then?

MADAM CHAIRMAN: It could be two or three months. It would be somewhat limited to an increase of that amount.

MR. PYE: The important thing is that we shouldn't tie ourselves into the timeline. The individual who makes the payment payback, it's geared according to their budget. If that happens to be \$5,000 or \$2,000 or \$1,000, there's only a maximum amount which the department can take off and a minimum amount of \$45. Often, the department doesn't go to the maximum amount because we advocate on their behalf, and I'm sure you have as well, advocate that the department allocates dollars based on a basic personal allotment and all of the criteria are set out for that.

So I don't think we ought to tie ourselves to that part of it, if you don't mind, committee members. I think we need to say that there has to be a process of fairness, and that's all we're interested in here, is a process of fairness.

MR. PARENT: Can we take out the 30 days and just say there should be a written notice?

MR. PYE: That's already in process, that's there now.

MR. STEPHEN MCNEIL: There is some question of whether it's being followed.

MR. PARENT: Well, if it's already there, why don't we put the wording that Community Services should adhere to their 30-day written policy.

MR. PYE: I think our colleague for Halifax Atlantic put it aptly, that we phrase the sentence in a way that it fits in with what we're requesting. I would not want us to be tied down to being a collection agency or worrying about the department. Our job would be to make sure that the individual had the ability to pay, or not.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Michele and then Stephen. Then I would like to ask Mora to actually read back the change to the recommendation. Perhaps we could do that first and then Michele you can speak to that.

MS. STEVENS: Under written notice, no changes to a client's social assistance shall be made before notice has been served and an appealed decision has been rendered - then we pick up ". . . mandatory notice and appeal prior to any changes being made to a client's social assistance - there should be a 30-day written notice of any/all changes to assistance and a right to an advocate during an appeal process. Appeal Board decisions should also be sent to the caseworker so they are aware of what is happening."

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Michele, did you want to comment on that?

MS. RAYMOND: Yes, we could almost take out that first sentence, mandatory notice and appeal. I think what we're saying is not that there should be a 30-day written notice, that the 30-day notice needs to be enforced, it's already in the . . .

MADAM CHAIRMAN: It needs to be respected.

MR. PARENT: Could you read that again, because that's different, much fuller than what's here.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Yes, that's the result of the discussion we just had.

MR. PARENT: I just want to hear it again.

MS. STEVENS: The written notice, with the added change was, no changes to a client's social assistance shall be made before notice has been served and an appealed decision has been rendered - then it continues on with a mandatory notice and appeal. Michele was just saying about taking that out and maybe picking it up - there should be a 30-day written notice of any and all changes.

MR. PARENT: If it already . . .

MS. RAYMOND: If we need to say there must be . . .

MS. STEVENS: Maybe the Department of Community Services should adhere to their policy of?

MADAM CHAIRMAN: What we're trying to prevent is the case where we know all too well that sometimes, until the client receives a cheque with a different amount, they don't realize that there has been any change made to their budget and they can't plan ahead.

MR. PARENT: I understand that. All I'm saying is to make sure they don't get clawed back on the other end in a way they can't afford.

MS. RAYMOND: What we're really talking about here, I guess, is that we want the department to adhere to guidelines that already exist and, if in fact they were doing so, the problem that you're talking about wouldn't escalate to the kind of degrees - so really, we're not trying to change anything except to ask for compliance from the department.

MS. DIANA WHALEN: Should that be clearly said in here? Just make it clear that we understand. They may think we don't understand that there's a 30-day - that's what I'm hearing from Mark. So if we could say in this part something that indicates the department should adhere to its 30-day notification regulation in every case, something like that.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Stephen, did you want to make a point, or has it been covered?

MR. MCNEIL: No, it has been covered. The way you may be able to change that is when you do the initial first change, which Mora just read, you could say the 30-day written notice of any or all changes must be adhered to in keeping with - and then you could go on to the additional end - a right to an advocate during the appeal process.

MS. WHALEN: I have one other question, if I could.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: On this one, Diana?

MS. WHALEN: It's a little different, it's on No. 4 but not on the wording, so if you want to get the wording right . . .

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Gary.

MR. GARY HINES: In the statement, should we make sure we refer to a number as it is identified in the Act that we're referring to, so it can bring their attention directly to that specifically?

MADAM CHAIRMAN: I think it's in their policy and not the Act or regulations.

MR. HINES: But it would be listed under section such and such, clause such and such, so that we're letting them know that we're defining . . .

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Good point.

MS. STEVENS: How about this? The Department of Community Services must adhere to its mandatory 30-day written policy as outlined in regulation - blah, blah, blah - of any and all changes to assistance - and then it would continue on.

MR. PARENT: Can we put should rather than must? It means the same thing, but it's less . . .

MS. RAYMOND: Abrupt?

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Stephen.

MR. MCNEIL: It's doesn't mean the same thing to me.

MR. HINES: It's the same thing if they're listening.

MR. MCNEIL: Should, but you don't necessarily have to. Must is clearly that you must do it.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: So is there a general feeling that it should be the stronger, the must?

MR. PARENT: I prefer the should, to me they mean the same thing. One is politer than the other, but I'm just one vote.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Unfortunately should has put us in the current situation where it's not always happening. (Laughter)

MS. STREATCH: Perhaps I could offer an alternative suggestion?

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Please, Judy.

MS. STREATCH: How about shall? Shall is the same as will do but it's not as abrupt as must. (Interruptions)

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Okay, do we have agreement on shall?

It is agreed.

Diana.

MS. WHALEN: My comment on No. 4 is more to do with the last bit where it said the appeal board's decision should be sent to the caseworker. I'm not sure that that covers what we discussed at the meeting.

My understanding was that there's no bank of previous decisions that every caseworker would know this has already been ruled on by an appeal board and this is what the decision was. What they're saying is that people are doing the same things over and over, caseworkers are denying people, for example, on the basis of the same point in different locations, different places and different times, and those are continually going to appeal for the same case. A precedence has been set all over, so it's a bigger problem than I have a particular client I'm working with and you now tell me it has gone to appeal. It isn't just to notify me as the caseworker for that case, but it becomes a precedent or it means that these cases have been shown to be acceptable, let's say, when the caseworker had said it was not acceptable.

Therefore there is a precedent that should be known across the province, rather than having every individual have to fight the same case over and over, and the time and effort of appeal boards and so on. It's more of a legal thing, as you would in law, that things that create a precedent are known to each other.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: In fact, the caseworker is usually at the appeal anyhow, so would know the results.

MS. RAYMOND: Okay, I just want to get this one clear. There may be some change in the legal weight of this that may or may not work, but you're saying really these decisions should be sent to all the caseworkers, not to the individual concerned. They should be made . .

.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: I think that's what was discussed at the forum . . .

MS. RAYMOND: All caseworkers . . .

MADAM CHAIRMAN: That they be available to all caseworkers.

MS. WHALEN: Even if it isn't the extra cost of mailing out to everybody, but it would be that they're available on-line or available both to the clients of Community Services and their advocates, and to the caseworkers and people within the department, so that they have a bank of knowledge, it increases their knowledge.

MS. STREATCH: Does this breach confidentiality in any way, shape, or form?

MS. WHALEN: Maybe it does.

MS. STREATCH: Yes, I'm concerned about that.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Then maybe no names.

MR. MCNEIL: What needs to be put on-line is the point you are addressing, not the individual case.

MS. STREATCH: Exactly.

MR. MCNEIL: You're challenging a point in the Act.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Perhaps we could ask the department what they would advise. We could mention the outcome we want and have the department be involved with how to reach that outcome.

MR. PARENT: Then an appeal board decision should be consistent across the province and that information supplied in an appropriate manner to various caseworkers.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Sometimes that's difficult because the chairman of the appeal often bases the decision on individual circumstances.

MR. PARENT: But that's what Diana was calling for, consistency across the province - weren't you?

MS. WHALEN: I think that each case is going to be different, but at the same time I think if a particular point in the Act has been challenged and found to be wanting then that should be known.

MS. STREATCH: The fundamental issue . . .

MS. WHALEN: There are often extenuating circumstances with the family dynamic or makeup, or the number of people, there are all kinds of other things that would vary.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: I have Michele and then Jerry.

MS. RAYMOND: I'm not familiar enough to know, but is this a problem that the regulations aren't being updated regularly enough or something? Is the difficulty that the Act is somehow not responsive enough? Because you want anonymity and you want it not to be too specific, which almost sounds like drafting new regulations or making sure that on-line guidelines are . . .

MADAM CHAIRMAN: I think it's more interpretation.

MS. WHALEN: I agree. What I understand is it's because there's a lot of scope for each individual caseworker to make decisions, and that's good in some degree that they have that flexibility, but it's just that it is perhaps too inconsistent across the whole board, possibly.

[1:30 p.m.]

MR. PYE: I think the approach that the member for Halifax Clayton Park is making is this, if I can be clear - when a decision has been made by an appeal board the decision may affect policy and rather than go through that process again with another client and so on, particularly if it's a positive outcome and recommended a policy change, or the interpretation of the policy is this, then it should be flagged to every person throughout the province, of the Department of Community Services, that here has been a decision so don't put your clients through this now because there's absolutely no need and it's a waste of money and time. I think I would be absolutely shocked if the department doesn't do that now, and I think that if we believe that the government doesn't do that now, then I think that we should say that and that's the kind of language we say it in.

MS. RAYMOND: So it's about updating the policy, keeping the policy current.

MR. PYE: It's a matter to effect change, rather than anything else, that comes out of a decision.

MR. PARENT: We all understand and agree, it's just the wording.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: I'm a little concerned. We've allotted two hours this afternoon and we've almost spent a half-hour on just one of seven recommendations in sort of the first three phases that we need to discuss.

MR. PYE: It's so critical though.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Oh, I know. Rather than try to draft the letter by committee, is it possible that we could just add under these some questions we have and get a little bit of feedback or clarification from the department as well, that there might be a little give and take in terms of information rather than trying to cross all the t's and dot the i's at this stage? I think we could get bogged down in the details.

MR. PARENT: We'll get another chance to look at it as a committee before it's finalized?

MADAM CHAIRMAN: I'm wondering if perhaps we can send the seven issues, with the gist of where we're coming from, to the department and then get some initial response from them.

MR. PARENT: And flag it as a draft, asking them to respond to those things. Is that what you're saying?

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Well, I'm not sure whether it would actually be considered a draft or just the first letter, that we're making the points and we want to continue the discussion on some of them. Some are so straightforward that they're pretty clear. Stephen.

MR. MCNEIL: I think it's important that we take as much time as we have to, today, to deal with this letter so we can get it sent off. If it means that the long-term goals we set out, that we have to deal with them another date, that's fine. I think these short-term ones, we can't just keep putting them off, and I think we need to deal with them and if one point is sticky then we have to deal with it. So let's deal with that point and move to the next one.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Could we agree perhaps to see where we are at 2:30 p.m. and then perhaps at least leave a half-hour to discuss the broader strategy of how we're going to deal with the rest of the information that has come in?

MR. PARENT: Why not appeal board decisions that set precedents should be widely disseminated to both other appeal board committees and to caseworkers?

MS. STREATCH: Yes, in a manner that the system . . .

MR. PARENT: The protection of privacy.

MS. STREATCH: Exactly, because the department may already have something in place.

MR. MCNEIL: They should be doing it already.

MS. STREATCH: And we would assume, as my colleague indicated a moment ago, that they would. So we would want to encourage that confidential transfer. I would support Mark's idea that it be disseminated in a manner that the department felt didn't breach that confidentiality.

MR. PYE: All internal matters, Madam Chairman, would be confidential anyway, or one would assume.

MR. HAROLD THERIAULT: Has this committee looked at the policy? That's the first thing you should do, look at the policy and if it's what you are saying here just tell them to follow it.

MR. PYE: I think Mark's point is well taken.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Diana.

MS. WHALEN: I think that certainly the wording that Mark has just given is fine. I think everybody agrees with it, and the idea of leaving it to them because, again, we're

challenging them to find a solution; we're only flagging what we heard. What we heard was that people are saying we're going back to appeal for the same kind of things. So that's reflecting that forum and the people who spoke. So we leave it in their hands, and I assume we will be checking up and seeing what they are doing on each of our suggestions. So they may have a simple solution. Let's go by what you said, and let them tell us.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: So, Mora, I know this is very tough, but what is the latest revision on that one?

MS. STEVENS: Well, let me just get the last one that Mark was dealing with. Appeal board decisions that affect a wide number of clients should be distributed to all caseworkers in a manner that does not affect a client's right to privacy?

MR. PARENT: In a manner.

MS. STEVENS: Okay, what I have so far. No. 4, and this is everything, Written Notice: No changes to a client's social assistance shall be made before notice has been served and an appealed decision has been rendered. The Department of Community Services shall adhere to its mandatory 30-day written notice, as outlined by regulations - whatever they are - in the ESIA Act for any and all changes to assistance, and a right to an advocate during an appeal process. Appeal board decisions shall be sent to the caseworker so they are aware of what is happening. Appeal board decisions that have an effect on policy should be distributed to all caseworkers in a manner that does not affect a client's right to privacy.

MR. PARENT: Appeal board decisions should also be sent to the caseworker, that was superseded by the second appeal board decisions.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Yes, I think we're taking that out.

MR. PARENT: That's going right out, that sentence.

MS. STEVENS: You mean the first one, appeal board decisions?

MR. PARENT: Yes.

MS. STEVENS: That's out. Okay?

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Okay, can we live with No. 4?

It is agreed.

Okay, great. Shall we go back to No. 1 and just start our way through? The point was that it's been in effect for five years and that it's time for a review. Any discussion? Yes, Mark.

MR. PARENT: I have no problem with a review, but I also sit on the Public Accounts Committee where we were hammered by having too many outside consultants doing consulting work. That's what this will result in, hiring another outside consultant to do a report. I guess it's inevitable, there's nothing you can do about it if you are going to have a proper review, but I just flag that. We are hammered in the Public Accounts Committee, the government Party, for having hired too many outside consultants to do consultancy reports. So now I'm agreeing to another one here, when I was criticized for being part of a government that had too many of them.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Okay, I have Michele and then Stephen.

MS. RAYMOND: This ESIA Act is supposed to be reviewed, is it not, every five years? Is that what you are saying?

MADAM CHAIRMAN: No.

MS. RAYMOND: Oh, okay. There is no legislative review in there?

MR. PARENT: I think there should be a review, but I just raise it. I need to get it on record because . . .

MS. RAYMOND: There is no review legislated?

MADAM CHAIRMAN: We're not aware that there is any automatic review.

MS. RAYMOND: Okay.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Stephen.

MR. MCNEIL: I don't think anyone would have a problem, and I think they would expect you to be hiring an outside consultant to review a department and the workings of a department. I think where some of the concern has been raised around consultants being hired is consultants being hired to implement government policy. How else are you going to do this? You can't investigate yourself, you can't review yourself. I just want to make it clear that I think it needs to be an independent consultant, and I can't see anyone finding fault with that.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Okay, Jerry.

MR. PYE: I just want to concur with my colleague, Mr. McNeil. This was a recommendation from those presenters to the Forum on Poverty. They specifically implied that they wanted an independent review of the department because they felt there would be some bias built in the department, and the department couldn't very well look at the internal workings of the department in a way in which they could be critical of each other. There are many different sectors of the Department of Community Services that need to be reviewed. I think

it's important that wherever possible we can, in these recommendations, take what we've heard from the presenters and make sure they're incorporated in this letter, and they had suggested an independent review. It wasn't ours, it was their suggestion.

MS. STREATCH: I think we can put this issue to bed if our colleagues would agree to discuss with their caucuses and encourage their caucuses on the importance of this independent review, that may alleviate any questioning in the Public Accounts Committee, because this is a very valid independent review that would be required.

MR. PARENT: I have a suggestion that might get us out of this totally. It needs to be outside the department, can it not be the Office of the Auditor General?

MR. PYE: He's already made comment with respect to the Department of Community Services. He's already made comment. Did you read the Auditor General's Report? I think it goes beyond that scope.

MR. PARENT: Okay. As long as you're aware that - it wasn't just those, there was criticism about certain counselling fees, but there was criticism about them overall. As long as you're aware that when you're signing onto this you can't come back and then say look at the money you're spending that shouldn't be spent. This is a budgetary amount.

MR. MCNEIL: I'm sure if we do, you will remind us that we encouraged you to do it.

MR. PARENT: That's why I raised it.

MR. HINES: Judy's suggestion covered that, though.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: For the purposes of recording, if people, rather than jumping in, if you could get on the speaker's list, it would be much easier. I could announce your name and we could at least have the right mic turned on. I'm so excited to see everyone this passionate about this issue, but if you could just let me know that you want to be on the speaker's list, I would appreciate that.

Michele, did you have a point on this one?

MS. RAYMOND: I think it's just been answered.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Does anyone else want to speak on No. 1, the first recommendation? Okay, let's move to No. 2, University Attendance.

MS. WHALEN: There is a typo. Attend university and then scratch "to university". Okay, that's all.

MR. PARENT: Affecting instead of effecting.

MS. STREATCH: Again, it's not something that I have a problem with, I wonder though, in the same way that I suggested we use the word shall, I would raise the issue over the word MUST.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: That was just reflecting, I think, not Mora's opinion on this, but the strong voice that came out on this particular recommendation from those presenting. That's a very good point. Do we have agreement that we'll change that to shall?

MR. PYE: Agreed.

MS. STEVENS: Lower case.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Yes, lower case. Okay.

MR. PARENT: It's affecting, not effecting.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Yes, we just changed that.

MR. PARENT: Have we agreed to shall?

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Yes, there seems to be general agreement.

MS. STEVENS: Would you like me to change all the shoulds and musts just to shall? I think it comes up a couple of times. Or do you want to go through them individually?

MADAM CHAIRMAN: We'll deal with them as we come to them.

MR. THERIAULT: Is this just for universities? What about community colleges . . .

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Well, actually, Junior raises a very good point, because anything beyond a two-year program at community college suffers the same fate. There's no approval possible for potential students on social assistance. So post-secondary?

MS. WHALEN: Yes, I would support what you said. Make it post-secondary . . .

MR. PARENT: Why not post-secondary education?

MS. WHALEN: Yes, post-secondary. I was going to suggest anything beyond a two-year post-secondary program, but if we say post-secondary - the real restriction is the two-year restriction.

MS. RAYMOND: Maybe we shouldn't be saying should allow single parents, but it should allow ESIA recipients. Is this particularly bad for single parents?

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Yes, they are the ones that it impacts on the most.

[1:45 p.m.]

MS. RAYMOND: The most, not entirely?

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Not entirely. That's another good point. Let's check on what wording we want in terms of post-secondary education.

MR. MCNEIL: To attend post-secondary education for more than two years without affecting their assistance.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Mark.

MR. PARENT: I would suggest that we go with Michele, drop single parents, allow those on income assistance to apply - well, they are allowed to apply, that's redundant - to attend post-secondary institutions without affecting their assistance. I think that's broad and that's good and that would work.

MR. MCNEIL: You need to add in to attend post-secondary education of more than two years without affecting their assistance.

MR. PARENT: Why do you need to add it in?

MR. MCNEIL: You can right now, you can say we are allowing that to happen now.

MR. PARENT: Yes, but I mean we're supporting what they are doing now and asking for more.

MR. PYE: Yes, but I think - Madam Chairman, excuse me . . .

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Jerry.

MR. PYE: I think that Stephen McNeil is correct. You have to be definitive here, and the number is definitive, more than two years, yes.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: So, Stephen, your point was post-secondary education beyond two years?

MR. MCNEIL: Of more than two years, without affecting their assistance.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Of more than. Okay. So do we have agreement that . . .

MS. STEVENS: Do you want me to read it?

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Yes, Mora.

MS. STEVENS: The Department of Community Services shall allow those on income assistance to attend post-secondary education programs of more than two years without affecting their assistance.

MR. MCNEIL: Just one change that I see. The Department of Community Services shall allow people, not those, I would take those out.

MR. PYE: That's right. Let's say persons.

MR. MCNEIL: To allow people, persons. Not to be picky.

MS. STEVENS: No, that's a very good point.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Could I suggest that we leave to apply in there, because the point is that not everyone who applies is going to be accepted to attend, but they shouldn't be discouraged from applying, and if they are successful (Interruption) It doesn't make any difference? All right, just leave attend then.

MS. RAYMOND: I have more problems with No. 3. I'm more worried about No. 3.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Yes, we haven't got there yet.

MS. RAYMOND: We haven't finished No. 2, okay.

MS. WHALEN: Just to clarify, we changed the heading on that as well, so instead of saying university attendance it says post-secondary, that's just a little consistency there. That's it, I'm satisfied with that.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Okay, do we have agreement? Mark.

MR. PARENT: I want just post-secondary, because it fits with the post-secondary attendance and I think it's just simpler and less wordy.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Oh, you mean not put in of more than two years?

MR. PARENT: Yes, just post-secondary. The heading is post-secondary attendance and to attend post-secondary without affecting their assistance. I think it's simple, it's clear, and it does what we need it to do.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Okay, I see some head-nodding . . .

MR. PARENT: And you also have a problem that not everyone who applied for community college who is on assistance is kept on assistance now. You may not be aware of

that, but all of you should with the work that you do. So that's why you want it to cover all post-secondary, not just beyond two years - all of it.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: That's a point, I know some people can't even get into the two-year programs at the community college now.

MR. PARENT: Right, because there are a limited number of seats.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: No, they're not getting permission from the department . . .

MR. PARENT: I know, because there are a limited number of seats in each area for permission for them to continue, so that's why it should just be post-secondary. Otherwise you are leaving out people who aren't getting the help now because not everyone, as you said, who asks, gets the help even if it's a two-year program. So just put post-secondary and make it strong and firm.

MR. MCNEIL: Madam Chairman, I prefer to have the two years in there. I think the department could come back and say, quite frankly, we already do that. We need to be specific on what we are talking about.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Okay, and the fact that they are . . .

MR. PARENT: But they don't always do it universally, that is the problem.

MR. PYE: That's not our problem.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: No, that's a different issue, okay.

MR. PYE: Not only that, because the spaces aren't available, it's not a problem of ours. Ours is to make sure that those individual persons are reflected in the policy and that they are able to get the benefit.

MR. PARENT: You misunderstand, though. I'm not saying the seats aren't available at the community college, only a certain number of people applying for the two-year program continue to be funded. Not everyone who applies is funded. That's why I will stick to post-secondary. Period. If you want to outvote me, you can.

MS. RAYMOND: I don't understand the rationale. Why are these people being turned down for the short program, for the community college program?

MR. PARENT: I don't know why, but it happens. It has happened to lots of mine (Interruptions) It's because I think only a certain amount of money is allotted. If you have a whole bunch of people - I have a community college right in my riding, so I may have more

people going to community college. All I know is that it's happening to clients of mine, so I want post-secondary. Period.

MR. PYE: Madam Chairman, that is the reason why we're putting these recommendations in prior to the budget, so those people who are left out because of allocated funding to a particular entity in the department are no longer left out, that these recommendations are a part of the budget process.

MR. PARENT: I'm not disagreeing with you, I'm agreeing with you.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: If I could just add a point here. I think the essence of No. 2 is to change the policy. It is resource related in a way, but I'm thinking the other problem is more resource related, and it's a separate issue. I don't think that came up in the forum, but that's certainly a recommendation the committee could add to the letter if they wanted to, but we didn't hear any of the groups talking about that particular issue. I think we're trying to reflect the key points that came out of our consultation. We're not saying that this isn't a problem, it's just that it's not a problem that was identified during those two days.

MR. PARENT: Can I ask a question then? The way this is written, it's clear this came out of the two-day conference, but it's our recommendations. If we're just passing on and systematizing recommendations that came out of the two-year program, that's different than these are "our" recommendations. What are we doing here? Which one are we doing? Are we just systematizing these are their recommendations and we're just putting them in systematic point form? Or are these our recommendations?

MADAM CHAIRMAN: I think we're trying to honour the suggestions and the voices that we heard at the two-day forum. I'm sure we could expand a number of these based on our own knowledge of the problems that have come through our door in our constituency offices. I think the point of this letter is to reflect the strong arguments that came through at the forum.

MS. WHALEN: If I could, as well, there were literally 100 recommendations, I'm sure, that we had gotten. There was a great stack of submissions made to the committee, and some of them we heard repeatedly from different perspectives and different people. We did the filtering of those recommendations ourselves by sitting down and discussing at the end of the day and a half, taking the last session to talk about how we wanted to move forward, which ones we felt were most compelling and had an impact on the Spring budget - it may have a financial implication, that's why they're on the short term.

On the issue of post-secondary, as you know, there's been a big campaign to change that particular policy, because it was reversed in 2000, 2002. I think it was 2002, it was reversed. It used to be that men and women who were single parents had access to university. So we're reflecting that, that's a particular aspect of lack of opportunity, I would guess. In this case we're saying that's what we want to address specifically. I was unaware, as well, that there

was a cap on how many people were being allowed to go to college under the two-year program. I think that is a very valid point and should be dealt with as a separate point.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: I have Michele first. Michele, is it on this issue or something different?

MS. RAYMOND: No, I think I'll defer.

MR. PARENT: I'm still not clear. Are these our recommendations or are these their recommendations? I know that these are what we heard at the committee, but are they our recommendations or the forum's recommendations? I'm still not clear.

MR. PYE: I think it's a combination of both. I really don't think we ought to tie ourselves down to that. What we've tried to do is get the message from the presenters and then try to fine-tune the recommendations that would be forwarded to the department. So I think it's a compilation of both.

MR. PARENT: The only importance of it is, if it's their recommendation, then fine, I was there when they were talking about university. In fact, if it's their recommendations, we should just stick to university, because that's what they were talking about at their recommendations, if you remember. They weren't talking about other things. If they're our recommendations, I want to stick to my post-secondary. That's the only reason I raise it.

MR. PYE: Then let's take a vote on it.

MR. MCNEIL: Mora, would you mind reading what you have there for No. 2?

MS. STEVENS: Okay, let me just go back, I was doing something else. It would now be entitled post-secondary attendance; the Department of Community Services shall allow persons on income assistance to attend post-secondary education programs of more than two years without affecting their assistance.

MR. MCNEIL: Madam Chairman, I'd like to put a motion on the floor that we accept No. 2, as presented by Mora.

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

The motion is carried.

Let's move on to No. 3, Housing Allowance.

MS. RAYMOND: I'm only concerned about the area, the rental market prevailing in what area - the riding, the city, and how they are supposed to decide.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: I think we were reflecting there the difference between urban and rural.

MS. RAYMOND: Yes, I know. Okay, so in the metropolitan area, or in the urban area, it can be very different. I mean they could set this at 85 per cent of the prevailing rate in Church Point - well, Church Point is not a good example. The prevailing rental rates are very different.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: I think we are talking about where they are living, but I'm sure they would have to do it on some kind of a regional basis, otherwise there would be a lot of administrative . . .

MR. PARENT: I have a concern about this for the very reason - well, slightly different than Michele - which rate do they set it at? What we're saying it would be variable, not that it would be set at the rate of Cow Bay for the whole province, but variables, which is what they were saying at the committee - it should be variable because it's cheaper to get a house in Middleton than it is to get a house in downtown Halifax, right?

I'm just wondering how specific we want to be on this recommendation because the regions meld into each other. For example, say in downtown metro, sure there is a set rate, but once you start getting to the edges of the areas, any area as a defined area you set out, you will start creating a differential between areas where really they are living side by side. Do you understand what I'm saying? So I'm just wondering if we could say that the housing allowance should be one that would allow proper housing in the specific area where the person is located, otherwise you could end up - like I don't know what area - say HRM goes up to Kings County and the two meet. HRM has \$800 and Kings County has \$400, and right where the boundary is you have a person trying to figure out which area to live in in order to get the higher assistance. Do you understand me? You have to be really careful on that.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: I do, but I think we left it vague because we were assuming that some common sense would be used in deciding those rates.

Jerry, you were next.

MR. PYE: Yes, it has specific repercussions for each area because remember the concern was in Antigonish, the lack of affordable housing in Wolfville, university communities, this has a significant effect, so therefore there needs to be a shelter component that's reflected at 85 per cent of the rate. Now remember, prior to the service exchange of 1995, there were different rates throughout the entire province. The Department of Community Services was specific on how to set those rates. I'm sure if we make it clear to them that it's 85 per cent of the market rate, they will be able to identify the hot spots where housing is at a premium or a need to set that rate. I don't think that we should be carving out particularly zoned areas of the province or areas of the province that might signal in to be a part of that. I think all we say to them is what we say in this sentence and allow them, with their expertise in the

department, to do that calculation and define if there needs to be a zoned area, let them have the zone.

[2:00 p.m.]

MR. PARENT: Maybe a solution is just to cut the last words "in the area".

MR. PYE: Yes, that I could live with.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Is there agreement that we just leave out "in the area"?

MR. PYE: Yes.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Okay. Anything else on that recommendation? Let's move down to No. 5, Telephone Service.

Is it agreed?

It is agreed.

No. 6, Wage Reduction.

MS. RAYMOND: Is this the clawback thing?

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Yes. Anything over they take 70 per cent and they can earn 30 per cent. There was a fair amount of discussion at the time on this.

I'll recognize Stephen, and then Mark.

MR. MCNEIL: Yes, during that discussion it was the intent that \$3,000 could be earned in a very condensed period, and I'm not sure this recommendation makes that clear. I think the \$3,000 could be earned in two months, but it would be your maximum amount for that 12-month period. The reason for that was because there are seasonal jobs, agriculture or whatever. I think we need to try to make that clearer.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Do you have a suggestion?

MR. MCNEIL: No.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Okay.

MR. MCNEIL: I just think that's the concern - it's a pretty wordy one, right?

MADAM CHAIRMAN: I think it was just trying to reflect a number of the concerns we had around that one.

MR. MCNEIL: What if we just said a change to the wage reduction to a baseline amount of no less than \$3,000 per year gross? Because if we're allowing them to earn that in a three- or four- or five-week period, what difference does it make if it's one day or one month?

MR. PARENT: Well, Stephen raised the issue I was raising, because seasonal work is one of the problems that we do have with the clawback. That was one of the suggestions that was made at the committee and I've made before. The other concern I have, and I don't know how you deal with this, but you don't want to create disincentives for people to work. Already you have disincentives for people to work. It's far better in some ways to remain on Community Services because you get your Pharmacare. That's why, when the government made the change that you could keep Pharmacare for a year, I argued that we should have a Pharmacare Program, period, for those who aren't covered by the Pharmacare Program, because even one year is not long enough.

If you're someone with diabetes, and here again the more money we allow not to be clawed back - I agree with it, I'm not disagreeing with it - but I'm far better off to remain on Community Services and make my extra \$3,000 than to not. I don't know how you get out of that trap because any time you set a level you're going to have that sort of problem, if you know what I mean. I just raise it as an issue. I'm not sure what the issue is - I know the minister raised it with me because I raised this with him and he said, okay, then if someone is working they'll end up making less than someone who's on Community Services, how do you deal with that, Mark? I don't have the answer to that, but it is an issue.

I know it's an issue with the Pharmacare Program, for example. The answer to the Pharmacare Program is to have a Pharmacare Program that covers everybody. That's the answer to that. The answer to where you set the line on how much people can make or what levels they're at, there's no real answer because you're always going to disadvantage some group to a certain degree, aren't you? That's a problem, I just flag it, I've no answers.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: I just want to add here that I don't think we can mislead ourselves. Each of these recommendations is related to a whole continuum of other policy changes that may be necessary. The bottom line is we have to increase the amount of annual income for people living in poverty. So wage reduction, that is tied into increases in minimum wage, it's tied into several other things. So you can't just pull one out and deal with it without looking at the rest of them.

MR. PARENT: That's the point I'm making.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: That's the reason we want to look at our mid- and long-term recommendations, because I think they will come into play and affect the rest of the policy climate there.

MR. PYE: Well, Madam Chairman, I think you just simply took the words right out of my mouth. In the long range, that will address itself by the guaranteed annual income that we are recommending as one of the long-range recommendations. We certainly hope, and I don't believe that persons on social assistance simply take advantage of a benefit, to them, that continues to be there. If that's the kind of message that I got out of your interpretation, then maybe you might want to correct me on it.

MR. PARENT: I'm not saying that. What I am saying is that we should not penalize people. I have had people come to me and say, Mark, I want to take this job but I am going to end up with less money in my pocket. I have to say to them, well, then don't do it. You know what I mean? So that's all I am saying. I think your answer was adequate, Madam Chairman, but I'm not saying what the member is questioning that I am saying.

MR. PYE: Thank you.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: So are there any changes we want to make - sorry, Michele, you're right.

MS. RAYMOND: This, of course, is something that is happening already, that disincentives do exist. This committee discussed at some length just what they would like to see as dollars, and we see these three different phrasings because of the different scales of time, should it be across a year or so? That, I think, we have dealt within the seasonal work thing. I guess I would like to say is we have said wage reduction should apply only to earnings above a \$3,000 a year base amount, but the program should be reviewed annually. We're saying that. Does that not make sense? We set this and it lasts for a year, then we review it.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Are you asking me? Is that a rhetorical question?

MS. RAYMOND: Yes, you are right, it's rhetorical. I would suggest that we say wage reduction should apply only to earnings above a \$3,000 a year base amount and annual review should take place.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: It is agreed.

So take out the reference to the different rates?

MS. RAYMOND: No, we'll put those at the bottom.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Okay. So basically we are taking the reference to the annual review and putting it as the second sentence to make the flow more reasonable. Stephen, did you want to comment on that?

MR. MCNEIL: I just want to hear what Mora has finally written.

MS. STEVENS: This is how it's coming out so far. Wage reduction should apply only to earnings above a \$3,000 per year base amount. An annual review should then take place on this program. The system should allow for different rates for a single recipient versus someone with dependants.

MR. MCNEIL: I would take that out. I would keep it very simple down to . . .

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Do we have agreement to take that last sentence out? Okay.

Let's move to No. 7, Emergency Fund. Does anyone want to comment on this one?

MR. PARENT: I think we should just take out the last sentence, otherwise I agree with it. The last sentence is just redundant, basically.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: I'm not arguing with you. If I could just explain why it was put in there. Several illustrations were given of where, if temporary emergency funding had been provided, the family would not have had to go on social assistance.

MR. PARENT: Agreed, but the last sentence is just redundant. It's not needed.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Oh, I see, because it says clients in transition or non-clients?

MR. PARENT: Yes.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Okay, I see your point now.

MR. PARENT: I agree with it. I just think the last sentence is redundant, and want to keep it as simple and to the point as possible.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Yes, right. Any further discussion?

MS. WHALEN: Yes, I think there is an important point in the last sentence, and that is that it's non-repayable assistance. I don't think that's caught in the other part. What we wanted there, we heard a couple of examples where people got some assistance to come into the city to start work or something, but then it all has to be repaid. So it doesn't bridge them to a new life, it becomes an overwhelming cost.

MR. PARENT: Why not: There needs to be a non-repayable discretionary fund.

MS. WHALEN: Okay, as long as you capture it.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Any further discussion? Any discussion about the introductory and closing paragraphs? Mark.

MR. PARENT: In the last paragraph, a question on planning to revisit this matter. In what form, in what manner, in what way? What are you saying in that statement? Are you planning another Forum on Poverty?

MADAM CHAIRMAN: No, I didn't draft the letter so I'm not sure.

MS. STEVENS: That was meant to pick up on what the committee said in the Friday afternoon session, that they were going to revisit this with the medium and long term and keep coming back to the issue. It certainly can be taken out, it was just to pick up on that thread that came out of the Friday afternoon session.

MR. PARENT: I think it's simpler to say: the Committee is asking your department to implement these recommendations, ta-da, ta-da, ta-da . . .

MADAM CHAIRMAN: I would agree and then we can send a separate letter . . .

MR. PARENT: We can always revisit it whenever we want to.

MR. PYE: We also need to have them respond within 30 days.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Yes, and Mark's not suggesting taking that out.
(Interruptions)

MR. PARENT: When they respond we'll be revisiting this anyway.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: So do we have agreement just to take out that reference that really applies to other recommendations?

MS. STEVENS: So start with: The committee is asking . . .

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Yes. Just to tidy everything up could we have a motion to approve sending the letter as revised?

MR. PYE: So moved.

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

The motion is carried.

Thank you very much. Let's move on to how we want to handle the medium-term and long-term recommendations.

MS. STEVENS: Again, these were just taken out of the draft very roughly to express what was said in that transcript, so they are changeable. All the ideas that sort of came out, I just tried to put them in some kind of order.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: I'm wondering, before we deal with them on an individual basis, could we talk a little bit about the process we want to use here? I keep thinking back to our predecessor committee that did a task force where they went around reviewing social assistance rates. They spent a lot of time and effort and did a lot of work on it and I think the draft report was actually at the stage of being approved internally by the three caucuses when the election was called, and it just died.

I think there was some discussion on the second day of the forum about how we can ensure that our interest in this topic continues on. Many of the medium- and long-term recommendations are ones that will take more homework, more action, discussion with the various departments, and can't be done overnight. Is anyone aware of any kind of mechanism we could use to assign some of this work to, that would continue moving the issue ahead without completely tying up our own resources here as a standing committee? As you say from the list, we still have a number of groups and issues to deal with.

MS. STEVENS: Can I just comment on that? After that report died because of the election there was an interim report that was made, but there came a problem. After that election the committee tried to restart that work and there was an order given by the Speaker that that work died, you cannot refer to those recommendations, the committee would have to start anew. You could look at the interim report but those confidential transcripts, everything dies because that was what they heard at the time.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Now it's a slightly different situation in that our forum is recorded by Hansard and that's public and not confidential.

MS. STEVENS: Anything public that they heard can be looked at up to the interim report, that's perfectly fine. The problem comes if you try to use those transcripts that were from their deliberations and what they were recommending, and that draft report. That is sealed, gone and the Speaker has already ruled on that.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: We can take ownership for this issue and continue to leave it on our agenda and keep moving ahead, or we could set up a subcommittee, for example. I guess one thing we had talked about was the possibility of bringing some representatives in from the voluntary sector, from the groups that presented to us, so that we could work alongside them. Jerry.

MR. PYE: That was spelled out quite clearly by the groups that made presentations, that they wanted to be part of the transformation or changes that were going to take place within the Department of Community Services, around employment supports and income assistance.

Now if we look at some sort of subcommittee, we have to know if that subcommittee is valid, if we have the jurisdiction through our terms of reference to formulate that subcommittee, how that subcommittee is going to interact with government or this department and so on. There's no easy answer to this.

[2:15 p.m.]

I know that I recommended at the time on that afternoon of Friday, January 13th, of putting it forward to the Voluntary Planning Board and asking them to form some kind of an action group that would go across the province. I don't know if they have it within their mandate or if they're entitled to carry that through, but I think that we really need to make sure that Nova Scotians who are affected by legislation and policy have input. You know it's a moving trend in that direction nationally and provincially in many provinces, to seek as much input as you possibly can.

I don't know, I'm at a loss and I'm sure you are, Madam Chairman, and a lot of us are at a loss, and I think we might need to get some direction from government, be it the Speaker's Office or someone else, on exactly what our mandate is and if we have the authority to bring on an ad hoc committee or a subcommittee on Community Services, or whatever it might be, to recommend a social planning council or something of that nature to go across this province and listen to the issues and interact with government on the effective changes that need to take place.

To sum it up, I'm open and receptive because I've racked my brain over this enough times in trying to figure out what the best route to take would be, and I'm going to listen to you.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Mark.

MR. PARENT: I'm in support of my colleague that we ask the Speaker whether we have the mandate and if so, in what form we can exercise that. If not, then we have to look at asking Voluntary Planning or some other group to do this, but we don't have enough information now as to how best to move this forward. I think we need that information before we can make an informed choice.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Stephen.

MR. MCNEIL: I would like to reverse that order. I think it should go to Voluntary Planning first, because that group would be made up of Nova Scotians, not just politicians. If they're not willing to look at it, then I think we should go to the Speaker to ask what role that we, as a committee, play in keeping this issue alive.

MR. PARENT: We don't have a mandate to do that.

MR. MCNEIL: In all fairness, I think we could make that recommendation. If the government says no, then we move on to the Speaker. I think we have a minority committee here and we can make that recommendation to the government. If the Premier wants to say no - the present or the new one - then let them say no and then we'll take our next step. This needs to be put right in the lap of whoever the Premier is and say listen, are you prepared to send this to Voluntary Planning, and that's where it should go first in my view, not to the Speaker's Office.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Judy.

MS. STREATCH: I just question whether we have the mandate to take it to Voluntary Planning as a standing committee. I'm not sure we do. I'm not disagreeing with you, Stephen, I just don't know if we have that ability.

MR. MCNEIL: If we, as a committee, don't have that ability then that's great, we'll ask the Premier. We have the ability to do that, and the Premier - the present one or the one due in in a couple of weeks - has the ability to do that. If they say no, then we take our next step and the next step may be to go to the Speaker's Office and ask him what to do.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Jerry.

MR. PYE: I agree with the honourable member for Chester-St. Margaret's. I don't believe we have the mandate to do that. I think the Speaker's Office is the office which has the mandate over committees and part of the roles and responsibilities of committees. So I really think that although I made the recommendation and I do agree that the Voluntary Planning Board should be involved in this, I do believe the only clear answer we will get is from a letter to the Speaker's Office indicating where we should go and what we should do. So I concur, I believe that we have no choice but to go to the Speaker's Office first. That's even before we involve the Premier or Voluntary Planning. I think we need to show we follow process.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Mora would like to make a comment.

MS. STEVENS: Just on making recommendations. The committee can recommend to whatever government department or organization that adheres before - it can make any recommendation it really wants to make, but that doesn't say that recommendation is going to be followed. So going to the Speaker and clarifying that this committee has done that in the past in clarifying that, yes, Community Services is actually under our mandate - because it's not actually spelled out in the rules, they're very antiquated when they deal with committees - and the Department of Health.

That's a very good point, it should be clarified by the Speaker's Office, but committees have made - like Public Accounts makes recommendations when it does for the Auditor General to look into something, it does it very few times. But he is an officer under the

Speaker's Office, it can be done; whereas Voluntary Planning is a government organization, it would be very wise to go to the Speaker and ask for clarification.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Could I just add a couple of cautions. I'm just repeating myself, I know, because I raised these during the forum as well. I don't have a lot of in-depth experience with Voluntary Planning, but it's my assumption they would want to do their own research and homework, so I think they would repeat the step that we've taken.

One of the things we heard most loudly from the groups at the forum is that this was the 12th or 20th time they had presented to somebody and they didn't want to keep repeating the message. They wanted to see someone take ownership and move forward with some action. I'm just worried whether first of all we couldn't tell Voluntary Planning that they had to have people living in poverty or people representing the advocacy groups on their task force and we couldn't tell them no, we've already done the homework; you shouldn't do the homework, these are the issues, we want you to move on those.

It could be seen as another delay in taking action and it could be up to two years before they reported back. I'm not sure that we really want to put off for another two years some of these very, very timely recommendations like a separate department of housing or a guaranteed annual income, those sorts of long-term recommendations that seem to be coming out of the forum. I just wanted to put that out on the table. Stephen.

MR. MCNEIL: Madam Chairman, I think we need to be realistic. Whether it's Voluntary Planning, a committee out of this group that puts recommendations forth for the long term - two years is not a long time. It sounds like a long time and it is a long time if you're living in poverty. I think we're trying to address the short term with these seven recommendations. I think we'd be fooling everyone in the voluntary sector and beyond if we think we're going to deal with this issue in less than two years.

I think where we can deal with that is these immediate seven recommendations that we've put forward which we believe need to be addressed immediately and then continue the process of how to deal with what has been seen as inherent problems in the whole system, I think is what needs to be looked at from a Voluntary Planning perspective. Is the department so convoluted that it's just too hard for anyone to find their way through it? Is it responding to the needs of the clients? Or is it being driven by bureaucrats? As the old line goes, there are more collection agents than there are social workers. Those are the kinds of questions I think a long-term group needs to look at.

I want to be clear that I think these recommendations are responding right now to what we were told in those two days. As a committee, I think we should be proud of these recommendations that are going forward, but what we're asking for next will be a long-term process and the only reason I was looking at Voluntary Planning is because it is outside of -

it's made up of different community people. We need to be realistic to everybody. We are very limited in terms of resources and how far we can go and all of those things. So when Voluntary Planning puts together a task force, it seems to carry more weight, in my view, than it does coming from the committee.

I think that the task force on ATVs is a prime example. Government may have done different little things with the recommendations, but at least gave the public and gave Parties recommendations that you can point to and say, you're not following those or you are following those and why aren't you, and it's outside of us as Party people really.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Point taken, Stephen, but I guess all I am cautioning is that if that ends up being the recommendation, we don't decide what their mandate is, what their composition is or the process that they use. That would be completely independent of this committee. Mark.

MR. PARENT: Just going back to these medium and long term, there are a lot of changes that need to be made to them before we pass them on to anybody. We're not talking about passing these on right now?

MADAM CHAIRMAN: No.

MR. PARENT: So I'll put these right over here because I thought I heard that. I agree with my colleagues who said before we need to ask the Speaker what possibilities that we have.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: What our options are?

MR. PARENT: Yes, what our options are. If the Speaker comes back and the only option is to recommend to whoever, the Premier, I guess, Volunteer Planning, that that's the way to go, well then, that is our option, but if we have other options, then maybe we want to discuss those and there might be a better option. I'm agreeing. I'm just reiterating the agreement I made earlier with Jerry.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Okay. Any further discussion? What if we clarified with the Speaker, then, what our options are and report it back to the next meeting and perhaps we could set aside at least 15 minutes to decide what our next step would be, and it may be making the recommendation about the Voluntary Planning process. Does someone want to move that?

MR. PARENT: So moved.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Sorry, Jerry.

MR. PYE: I just wanted to say, Madam Chairman, that when we send this off to the Speaker, we want to let the Speaker know why we have come to this conclusion and the intent

behind the request to him, that this came out of the Forum on Poverty and so on, so that we set context.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Stephen.

MR. MCNEIL: I just want to clear something up that may have been misinterpreted by the member for Kings North. During my little rant, I was not talking about the medium or long term, I was talking about those seven recommendations that we just agreed on that we have now put forward to the department, which I think deal with some of the issues that we are talking about in terms of short term.

MR. PARENT: Those have already gone forward. (Interruptions)

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Mora has just reminded me that our next topic is the youth mental health services through the IWK, which is a very broad topic. Is there any chance we could agree to spend an extra 15 minutes and go to 11:15 p.m., that day, rather than shortchanging the IWK?

MR. PARENT: What day of the week?

MS. STEVENS: The next meeting is scheduled for Thursday, February 23rd.

MR. PARENT: Okay, can I ask on behalf of the PC caucus then, Mora, there will be a new Premier in place by February 11th, and all the members on all the committees are going to be different than what we have now, so please make sure that's communicated to them.

MS. STEVENS: I can do that.

MR. PARENT: But you can flag that this is an additional 15 minutes; otherwise, they might not pick that up.

MS. STEVENS: Of course.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Good point, thank you for that. Did we take a vote on the motion? No.

Would all those in favour of first going to the Speaker, then ta-da, ta-da, ta-da, please say Aye. Contrary minded, Nay.

The motion is carried.

Let's go back and start with medium-term recommendations.

MR. MCNEIL: We can kind of discuss these, but until we know how we're going to proceed, it's going to make it difficult to decide what we're going to do with these. Are we just going to . . .

[2:30 p.m.]

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Well, I think that the medium-term ones are still within our purview. The earlier recommendation was mostly talking about the long-term recommendations.

MR. MCNEIL: I'll give you one, No. 5 and the Keep the Heat program. It's one that's been in the news a little bit of late. I think there's been a group that has been left out of the Keep the Heat program, and that is a group of low-income Nova Scotians whose heat is included in their rent. The government, I think, has the ability now - there's \$7 million still left in that pot that they designated - to bring forward a policy that allows low-income Nova Scotians who fit the criteria whose heat is included in their rent to apply for a rebate of \$100.

As a matter of fact - I might as well put it on the record - my office was told on a number of occasions, as were other Nova Scotians, that that change had already taken place. The minister had denied that and, eventually, the communications person in the department agreed and said, yes, there was some change and there was some mix-up. Well, I think it's time to do the right thing. They have \$7 million left in that pot that they can now expand that program so that the very people we were trying to help in the first place are going to all be caught up into the catchment process.

I don't know if we want to have a discussion, but I would like to put a recommendation. I would like to have the support of this committee to support those Nova Scotians who thought they would be receiving a rebate as of 10 days ago. I don't know whether you want to discuss that before I put a recommendation on the floor.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Are people comfortable? Shall we just jump ahead to No. 5? We always have the option of adding one to the seven in that letter and having it go through as our first series of recommendations.

MR. PYE: I certainly think the appropriate thing to do here would be to put the recommendation forth first and then have a discussion around the recommendation. So if you are prepared to draft a recommendation now, I'd be open and receptive to debating that recommendation as well, Madam Chairman. I want to say - maybe I can say it now - the Affordable Energy Coalition, I think, was the group that made the presentation, and they had no logical reason for excluding low-income Nova Scotians who paid rent from not receiving the rebate. They just took it at word that these individuals somehow didn't pay for their energy costs, or their fuel costs. I think it will be in the Hansard report that I had told them that all that which is calculated by the investment property owners as a cost of operating their units and

their buildings is borne by the tenant. It's not borne by them. The cost is evaluated out and shared out, and so the energy costs are built into the rent cost. Therefore, I'm in total agreement, again, with my colleague that low-income earners should in fact be the recipients of the energy rebate.

We've heard from the Affordable Energy Coalition there will be \$7 million that will not be spent, and believe you me, there are many Nova Scotians in the constituency that I represent and all across this province who can benefit from getting a \$100 rebate or whatever. They can calculate that on a basis of what they might think. It might not be the full rebate of \$200 or \$250, but that's up to them to do the calculation as long as we make the recommendation to go forward.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: I just want to raise a point, and then I'd like to hear from Mark before we actually get a motion on the floor. I think the other point of this was to set up a fund that would encourage low-income residents to be able to upgrade their energy efficiency and whatnot so they could have the long-term benefit from those cost savings as well as the point that they weren't able to benefit under the Keep the Heat program.

MR. PARENT: I could stand to be corrected, I was at the meeting that day when that discussion went on and I'm just reviewing the notes. I have no problem with the points my colleagues made. It is, however, a separate point from what we're looking at right now. What the Affordable Energy Coalition said was not dealing specifically with that point. I know that my colleague did raise it as an issue, but that was not in their presentation. If we are passing on their presentation and their suggestions, then I think we stick to that and we make this a separate, stand-alone item.

We can review Hansard and I've just been reviewing it, but I think I'm accurate because I listened carefully. If we want to make this a separate motion, apart from this discussion, after we've had this discussion, then I think we should do that. But what we've said before is we're passing on, we're codifying and we're making clear the things that came out of that forum and out of that forum this is a fair analysis of what they had to say. This issue that's flagged now was not part of their presentation. I think if you want a motion, let's leave it until the end of the meeting and make it a separate motion apart from this, otherwise we're going to confuse the things.

MR. MCNEIL: I agree and disagree. A real politician, right? I agree that I don't believe this should be part of our seven recommendations that go forward. I think that letter is completely separate and that's going to go forward. I disagree this issue was not talked about - it may not have been specifically mentioned, but it certainly was in our deliberations following the forum by a number of the people sitting around the table.

This is one of the things that can be done today, immediately. Government has already set the money aside. They've already said they had the money. They have \$25 million they have so proudly and boldly told us. There's \$7 million left in the pot and there are people who are being left out and they know it. They have made that change, their own staff were on the phone saying you are eligible. It came to the minister and he said, no, no, no, somebody's wrong. Finally, the communications people said no, it was happening, but it's not happening anymore.

I want to put a recommendation on the table here just from the committee - it doesn't have to be part of that letter that's going forward. It certainly was talked about during the deliberations that we had on the Forum on Poverty. There's no question it was mentioned.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Why don't we spend another 10 or 15 minutes on the medium-term recommendations, and then at about 2:50 p.m. we'll allow you to move the motion, we'll have some discussion and, if it's approved, we can send over our signatures the way we usually do for motions from this committee. Would that be . . .

MS. WHALEN: I'm fine with your plan and I'm sorry to go off topic again to something new. I wanted to reply to what Mr. Parent was saying about codifying what we've heard, that it was almost like we reiterated what we heard. That wasn't my understanding from our earlier discussion about what our purpose was in writing the letter. We heard hundreds of recommendations, and what we did was use our judgment. Which one sounded like the most urgent? Which ones do we agree with? There were recommendations we heard that I'm sure we don't agree with. Some of them we picked up right now because we used our own judgment and we've used our own prioritization and we've chosen ourselves, based on our own experience.

The forum was an opportunity for people to lay all kinds of issues in front of us, but I don't believe we're only just sorting them out now. I think we used our own judgment. I think the record should show that the committee also was using our experience and our background and what we know from our constituencies and using that to create a list of immediate changes that we want to see.

MR. PARENT: But that's different from the response I got when I raised the issue about post-secondary education.

MR. MCNEIL: I don't think it was different than the response he received. We voted on the motion, we disagreed with the position he took so we voted on it and we said no, we understand what you're saying but this is what the committee wants to put forward.

MR. PARENT: Anyway, we've already agreed that we'll put this at the tail end and treat it as a stand-alone issue. So we've agreed to it.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Okay, let's move on then. Do you want to go back to No. 1 and go through them in order?

MR. PARENT: I would go back to my colleague's recommendation. It's very difficult to do that when we don't know what vehicle we're going to have to go forward on these. Can we not hold these? I look at the time, can we not hold these until we get a response from the Speaker's Office on what sort of vehicle we can use to advance these causes?

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Just to clarify, it was my understanding the vehicle we're talking about was more for the long term - the medium term are actually recommendations that could quite easily come from this committee, but we recognize that we would need longer than the afternoon of the two-day forum and today in order to perhaps reach a decision on these.

MR. PARENT: My understanding was that the Speaker's Office, we would be asking them about this page, medium and long term. This we agreed on, we went through point by point, and it's going forward already. Have I misunderstood?

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Well, I think we can pick and choose from the medium term. There are some that we can make recommendations on either at this meeting or another meeting that we will set aside in the very near future. Others may need more homework and research and they would then fall into the ones that take longer term.

MR. PARENT: I think we're saying the same thing. All I'm saying is, we have agreed on these seven, they are going forward. If we're going to take some of these medium term and agree on them, basically, logically, what we should do is add them to the seven and go back and revisit the seven.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: I think we recognize we wouldn't have time to get through that list today.

MR. PARENT: Right, so then I still go back to my colleague's point, if we don't have time to get through this list properly, why not, in the interest of doing it properly, wait until we find out what vehicle, and that will help us in the wording of some of these issues as well, I think?

MS. WHALEN: Well, I'm afraid that that would discourage us from even attacking these today, or picking some off. There are some that we can do by motion, by making a motion that would then be translated to the department, or some action could be taken. I know in our discussions before, some of the longer term, the really broad thing that we might want a task force or a Voluntary Planning group to look at would be the whole poverty strategy, or alleviating poverty in the very broadest way. Some of these are very specific. Just looking at No. 1, we can deal with that today. Do we want an accountability in six months, do we want to set up a mechanism for accountability? We can say we can do it.

MR. PYE: You know on the two-day forum discussing poverty, many of the presenters really didn't want a long-term process at all. They wanted many of the issues to be addressed immediately, and many of them have told us they have gone through these exercises a number of times. They have attended forums on poverty. They have attended meetings. They have made their presentations, sat and watched them put into a bunker or somewhere else like that, collecting dust, never to see the light of day.

There are some items here in the medium term, and although I am not receptive to the six months and even though we didn't, I think, identify a time frame within the long term yet, there are some items here that just simply require recommendation and referral to the appropriate authorities - No. 4, for example. The adequate nutrition and housing should be a basic human right to be sent on to the Human Rights Commission. There is no reason why we can't deal with that today. There is no reason why we need to concern ourselves with what kind of a committee structure or what kind of a recommendation might come from the Speaker to look at that. That is something that can be done now. So I think we need to look at the seven items that are in medium term. I also agree with Mark, that maybe some of those can be shifted over to immediate action, can be sent via the letter that is going out today.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Just to follow up, and don't forget we have the follow-up letter and two representatives here from the Face of Poverty consultation regarding No. 3.

MR. PYE: Absolutely.

MR. PARENT: My suggestion is, if we are going to do that, anything in the medium term that we agree on, the wording be put in and added to the seven points in our letter. I mean, if we have agreed on them here, what is the arbitrary distinction between them? Put them in with the seven.

MS. RAYMOND: I guess to some degree I agree with Mark, because several of the medium-term things are actually really subsets of what we are saying. We are saying review the ESIA Act. Well there is no reason that shouldn't include reviewing appealing procedures. We say to review the shelter, to change the shelter allowance, but then medium time is review the personal allowance. I'm not sure why that shouldn't be just wrapped into a review of (Interruptions) Yes, the telephone, personal and the shelter are all essentially the same thing, they're all subsets of the same thing, and the wage reductions.

Then maybe what we might want to do in the medium term is to set up a task force somehow, somebody, which looks at the best techniques for getting basic sustenance. Guaranteed minimum income or raising the minimum wage or moving wage reduction things, they're all subsets of what's the best tactic of addressing poverty. That's what your task force needs to be doing. Only after that are you looking at changing legislation, saying human rights legislation should be changed, review the departmental structure, do accountability reports. It seems to be

that half of what you're recommending in the medium term is already in the short-term recommendations.

[2:45 p.m.]

MADAM CHAIRMAN: So do we want to pull out a couple of the medium-term recommendations and quickly discuss putting them in the letter with the original seven?

MR. PARENT: Since we have our witnesses here and you flagged it, if we review the ESIA Act and tie it in with No. 3, we can incorporate some of that wording right in there. I have to leave at 3:00 p.m. and we have some other items to deal with too.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Do we want to discuss No. 3 now while we have the letter in front of us and the representatives here?

MR. MCNEIL: I guess it was just mentioned by the previous speaker, but I would assume under No. 1 in the letter reviewing the ESIA Act, would they not be reviewing the personal allowance? That's part of the Act. They would also be reviewing the appeal process. I think that's included in No. 1, I think that's already there.

MR. PARENT: Do you want to spell it out? Or do you want to just leave it the way it is?

MR. MCNEIL: I don't know how much more clear you can be by saying we want a review of the Employment Support and Income Assistance Act, which would include that.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: We could even put: Employment Support and Income Assistance Act, including the appeal process and the personal allowance rates.

MR. MCNEIL: Okay.

MS. STREATCH: I'm not disagreeing, I would just flag, is that exclusive? Or are you simply giving . . .

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Including, just to make sure.

MS. STREATCH: So you don't eliminate anything from being reviewed.

MR. PARENT: So that takes care of Nos. 2 and 3, right?

MS. WHALEN: With No. 4, which was the one about referring to the Human Rights Commission, I think that could be a separate request that we initiate today. Again, that was because it's accepted that people have a right to be properly housed and fed and safety. We heard so much that was compelling evidence as to why that should be decided. What was really

underlying here was that the Human Rights Commission could make a statement about that, about poverty and the need to maintain an adequate level of the standard of living. That's almost like an independent position that would be coming from the Human Rights Commission, an independent statement. I would move that we go ahead and ask them for that.

MR. PARENT: I think it's already in the Charter of Rights and Freedoms. On a philosophical basis, though, I can tell you for a long time on this whole discussion of rights, and maybe it's not worth it, but the only right internationally that is recognized is the right not to be tortured, which the United States seems to be disallowing in Guantánamo. There's a big philosophical discussion on whether rights language is appropriate language in regard to positive rights, that it may well be appropriate in negative rights, the right to freedom from oppression, but other language needs to be - otherwise, the problem is it becomes meaningless and empty. Do you know what I'm saying? It becomes something that doesn't say anything and we all feel we've gone away and we've done something to help poverty and we've done nothing. Anyway, that's a big philosophical argument that's not worth taking our time up now, we'll pass No. 3 and get on with it.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: The other possibility is to refer this to the Human Rights Commission and just ask them for the response to it. (Interruptions)

MS. STREATCH: Sorry, Mark. We started to have the same discussion. I was going to ask if indeed the Human Rights Commission could look into it to see if it does fall within the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, is there something that they can then pick up upon.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: They could advise us what may be needed.

MS. STREATCH: Exactly, yes.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Are we agreed that we could add it to that? Oh, no, that's a separate letter going to a different group. Now, it's 2:50 p.m. We've dealt with three of these. We're going to fast-track them and put them in the first letter. I'm just wondering now if we should move on to a motion. Stephen, are you prepared to move a motion about the Keep the Heat recipients' eligibility?

MR. MCNEIL: I am, Madam Chairman, and thank you very much. I would like to put a motion on the floor that the government expand the Keep the Heat program so that low-income Nova Scotians whose heat is included in their rent are eligible to apply for a rebate under this program.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Discussion? Mark.

MR. PARENT: Just eligible to apply so the criteria - say the landlord put up the rent, then clearly they should get the money. Say the landlord didn't put up the rent, do they still get the money?

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Well, it's already included in their rent.

MR. PARENT: I know it's already included, but they may have had a year lease or something and the lease was set up when heat was at a certain rate. The landlord comes back and ups it, fine, you know, they should get the extra money. If the landlord hasn't upped it and is absorbing it, then really it should be the landlord who gets the money. How do you differentiate?

MR. MCNEIL: Madam Chairman, I completely disagree with that. A Nova Scotian who locked in their oil rate six months ago and the increases have been going up with the rate still eligible for it, you know, they're still eligible for the rebate as well. I mean you don't send it on to Irving, they're eligible for it. A low-income Nova Scotian whose heat is included in the rent is paying for their heat, it's as simple as that, and they were fortunate, quite frankly, if they locked it in a year ago and had a 12-month lease, but if they're still eligible for this program, they should be entitled to this.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Jerry, then Mark.

MR. PYE: Madam Chairman, I just don't know if this recommendation is going to be accompanied with the other seven recommendations or if this recommendation (Interruptions)

MADAM CHAIRMAN: No, it's a separate letter.

MR. PYE: It's a separate letter so that we make sure that we keep getting in under the umbrella of the Keep the Heat program. And if we don't, then that's important to know. Again, I concur with my colleague that, in fact, you know, the landlord, although there might be a year lease, the tenant may have signed a year lease prior to that with increases in fuel who will not be compensated as well. So there's no logic to the comment that you make that because they didn't sign or renew a lease reflecting the increased cost of energy or fuel, that they should not be a recipient of the rebate. I just don't concur with that at all.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Mark.

MR. PARENT: I can see why you may not concur with it, but I think there's logic in it. The logic is that someone who's hit with higher heating bills, we would want to help them out and that's the logic within it. I know very few people on community services who locked in with their heat. They usually have to go with the oil truck that delivers \$100, \$200 at any given time, and the people who locked in at the prices are the people who are middle-income and upper-income earners.

I'm just raising the issue that if the person did not experience an increased heat bill from their landlord, that you have an issue there, and I don't know what the answer is and I don't even know the rationale of why they didn't include renters in it, but maybe we can cover it by asking them to look at this, to revisit their policy on this matter, because there may be some issues that we're unaware of right here that are reasons why the policy is as it is. I don't know why the policy is as it is. There may be some issues that are important issues to look at.

I certainly have sympathy with renters. I have cases, and I think this was raised at the Poverty Forum, where the person - I had one person who rented a place, \$300, they were saying wonderful, hallelujah, I'll have some money now to spend. Well, the reason it was \$300 was there was absolutely no insulation in the place whatsoever. They had to pay \$300 every month just for heat. So certainly I'm aware of the issues, but there may be some justification or there may be some fairness that we can provide in this and that's all I'm raising. It's getting near 3:00 p.m., if you want to send the letter, send the letter.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Not to take part in the discussion, but I just want to mention there's another complication in the eligibility. I'm not sure of the figure but it's something like they have to use 12,000 kilowatts or whatever - 10,000 is it? - in the previous year and I don't know whether that's going to be another loophole they could use to cut renters off or not.

I just add that because I've run into that complication as well.

MS. WHALEN: Yes, that complication was for people who heat with electricity. I raised it at the forum about it being a Catch-22 - if you're trying to conserve energy and keep your heat use down. I think I was told by the department that is being reviewed as well as something they may relax given the fact the uptake on the program has been below what was expected and there is the extra \$7 million sitting there because they didn't have as many people apply.

But what I wanted to say was about people in apartment buildings who are paying in their rent. Again, the optics might be that the apartment owner is absorbing those extra costs but you and I know, all of us around this table know, they will not absorb it into the next year when the lease is up. So if the lease comes up in June, July, in the Summer months, it will be jacked up to make sure the owner is going to recoup their costs. So I think it's important that we recognize they may not have an immediate increase in costs right now, but as soon as their lease is up they will be affected by increasing oil prices or electricity prices, whatever the building is relying on.

I think it makes sense to support the renters now because this is going to hit them long before next Winter comes. The amount of help is small so I think there's every rationale to support them as well. They're paying for it now and they'll continue to pay and they'll pay extra

if the landlord has been left without. It is a business and I think that's all I'm trying to say - it is a business for people who are landlords and they will not absorb extra costs. The market can absorb additional rents. We've seen that in metro, the rents have gone up and up.

I think the motion on the table is a good one and I would like to support it, and let's vote on it.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Any discussion on the motion?

MR. PARENT: Could we have the motion reread?

MS. STEVENS: I didn't get it so I'll have to get . . .

MR. MCNEIL: That the government expand the Keep the Heat program so that low-income Nova Scotians whose heat is included in their rent are eligible to apply for a rebate under this program.

MS. STREATCH: Could I just ask a question? Low-income Nova Scotians who qualify for the Keep the Heat program, would that be necessary to add that in there or . . .

MR. MCNEIL: I can, but I don't think it's necessary. I think we're talking specifically about this program. They would have to meet the criteria of the program. Actually, quite honestly, the department has thought this out already because they've been telling Nova Scotians, it's easy to implement - you meet the criteria. The only addition they need is a copy of their lease which says the heat is included in the rent or a letter from the landlord. Not complicated. They figured this out, they just haven't implemented it yet.

MR. PARENT: Just a clarification. We're writing this letter to the Minister of Energy, right?

MR. MCNEIL: No, Service Nova Scotia and Municipal Relations (Interruptions) All the inquiries of this program are through them. Service Nova Scotia and Municipal Relations has been the one that Nova Scotians have been dealing with on . . .

MADAM CHAIRMAN: But I guess the essential question is who's making the decisions?

MR. MCNEIL: Minister Barnet is the one who has been talking on it.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Are you ready for the question?

MS. WHALEN: I wanted one more, Madam Chairman. Would the committee think it's wise to include the 10,000 kilowatt hours as well and suggest they review or eliminate the 10,000 kilowatt hours? (Interruptions)

MR. PYE: That's a substantive change.

MS. WHALEN: Too much? Okay, we'll deal with it later.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Are you ready for the question? Would all those in favour of the motion please say Aye. Contrary minded, Nay.

The motion is carried.

We'll send that letter out as soon as possible. Did someone say there was more business to discuss today? (Interruptions)

MR. PYE: We've already approved the letters. There was only one other thing that Mora presented to us and that was a list of witnesses. Unless you wanted to review the list of witnesses.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: No, we're going to set aside time to meetings. Just to clarify, the approved witness list, Mora made that available this afternoon, but not with the intention that we'd be discussing it today. Because we've already added something onto the next meeting, I suggest that we be prepared to discuss the witness list at the meeting after the IWK mental health services, whatever date that is. So two meetings from now, we will continue on with the discussion on the agenda.

Could we have a motion to adjourn?

MR. MCNEIL: So moved.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: The meeting's adjourned.

[The committee adjourned at 3:01 p.m.]