

HANSARD

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COMMITTEE

ON

COMMUNITY SERVICES

Thursday, October 26, 2006

Committee Room 1

**Department of Community Services
January 2006 Forum on Poverty Recommendations**

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COMMUNITY SERVICES COMMITTEE

Ms. Marilyn More (Chairman)
Hon. Ronald Chisholm
Hon. Leonard Goucher
Mr. Patrick Dunn
Mr. Gordon Gosse
Mr. Trevor Zinck
Mr. Keith Colwell
Mr. Leo Glavine
Mr. Stephen McNeil

[Hon. Leonard Goucher was replaced by Mr. Keith Bain.]

In Attendance:
Ms. Mora Stevens
Legislative Committee Clerk

WITNESSES

Department of Community Services

Ms. Marion Tyson
Deputy Minister

Mr. Harold Dillon
Executive Director - ESIA and Housing

Ms. Janet Rathbun
Director of Income Assistance

Mr. Mike Townsend
Director of Employment Support Services

HALIFAX, THURSDAY, OCTOBER 26, 2006

STANDING COMMITTEE ON COMMUNITY SERVICES

9:00 A.M.

CHAIRMAN
Ms. Marilyn More

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Good morning. Could I invite the members of the committee to take their seats, and we'll get underway. We're pleased to have with us officials from the Department of Community Services. We're going to get some information from those officials on the seven recommendations that were forwarded from the previous incarnation of this committee, last Spring. I just want to give a little context, and then we'll go into introductions.

You'll remember that the previous Standing Committee on Community Services sponsored a two-day Forum on Poverty in the Red Room at Province House. It was very well attended. We had probably 25 different coalitions, as well as individuals concerned about poverty in this province. They created presentations that summarized a lot of research, summarized a lot of background information, and described the current situation of many people living on low incomes in this province.

The committee met immediately after the forum and pulled out some of the recommendations presented by these groups where there seemed to be general consensus that changes in those recommendations would create a much better quality of life for the people involved. Because of the process of the Spring budget, we felt we needed to get those recommendations in as quickly as possible, hoping to have an impact on that budget. The new Standing Committee on Community Services has reaffirmed and is continuing its focus on poverty issues.

Our hope is that somehow government and community groups and people living on low incomes are going to be able to work together to develop a province-wide strategy, an anti-poverty strategy that will have both short- and long-term impact on the citizens of this province. That's our ultimate dream. So we're doing it step by step. We realize that our mandate does not allow us to set that up as an independent committee, but we certainly would like to collaborate with departments, other committees, and the voluntary sector and community-based groups towards that goal.

We're very pleased to have you here today. We'll start with introductions. I do want to welcome also Barb Nehiley, who's the HRM Social Policy Analyst, with us this morning. Thank you for coming, Barb. We also have two representatives of the Face of Poverty. You may recognize them, because the Face of Poverty is one of the groups that presented at the forum and they've taken it upon themselves to come and observe our meetings ever since last January. So Corrie Douma is here from Dartmouth and Carolyn Earle from Halifax. So thank you both for coming. Ron, perhaps we'll start with you for introductions, please.

[The committee members introduced themselves.]

MADAM CHAIRMAN: So perhaps, Deputy Minister, if you wouldn't mind re-introducing yourself to all of us again.

MS. MARION TYSON: I'm Marion Tyson, the Deputy Minister of Community Services, and to my left is Janet Rathbun. Janet is directly responsible for all of the income assistance programs in the province. To my right is Mike Townsend and Mike is responsible for all of the employment support programs in the province. Behind me is Harold Dillon, in the black suit. Harold is the Executive Director of Employment Support and Income Assistance and Housing, so if there are housing questions we'll be asking Harold to help out with some of the more detailed questions that he may be able to answer.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Thank you very much. Would you like to start your presentation.

MS. TYSON: Yes, thank you. I have some slides which are included in the packages that the committee has. The slides, I think, will give a little background information and general information to the committee. We also included in the package short answers to the seven recommendations, responses, and we'll be happy to answer additional questions on those.

I hope that some of the slides and questions will provide some information on some of the funding and investments that government has been making, particularly in recent years, to try to address this question of poverty and income support. I will attempt to show some examples of how the program does work and how it helps improve the lives and livelihood of those of our clients that it serves.

The Employment Support and Income Assistance Program is a multi-faceted program. It provides financial support for people in need; it provides employment supports and counselling; it provides special needs for people if they have special needs; and other expenses, including Pharmacare coverage. It also provides important information and referral for our clients. The overall objective of the program is to help move those individuals and families who can, toward greater independence and those who can, toward self-sufficiency, if it's within their capacity to do so.

This slide shows the amount of funding that the government provides for Employment Support and Income Assistance and a bit of a breakdown as to where that funding goes. The total budget for this program is approximately \$350 million per year and the largest part of that would go directly to basic income assistance. That would be the food and shelter component, basic needs, personal needs, food, clothing, shelter.

The next item is special needs funding and that would cover items such as medical needs, special medical needs, child care, transportation - for example, to and from work - and individual needs cost, at present, about \$35 million a year.

The next item is Pharmacare and that is the basic Pharmacare that our clients in the program are entitled to. That costs about \$50 million a year.

The Nova Scotia Child Benefit provides additional support, it's income-based, and it's about \$26 million a year. It supplements the National Child Benefit that the federal government provides.

Employment Support Services helps clients in developing their skills and overcoming barriers. Some of our clients do have multiple barriers, so we're attempting to help them through this program to overcome some of them. It assists them in seeking employment. That's the purpose of that program.

Finally, we do provide grants to service providers, and those service providers also help our clients become more self-sufficient or get into the employment market. Some of those are the workshops that we hear about for some of our clients. That, at present, costs about \$25 million.

[9:15 a.m.]

Just another comment. For your information, the caseload in this program, I think everybody knows, has been continuing to decline since about 1995, when the caseload reached a high of about 55,000 clients at any one time. It's down to slightly less than 30,000 this year. I'm very pleased to say that it has declined further this year, although the decline has been slowing in recent years. That is due to the strength of the Nova Scotia economy, which I think I heard on the radio either this morning or yesterday morning was quite good, and also the efforts that our employment support

programs have been making in trying to help people get into the labour force, and just general demographic trends.

What I wanted to tell the committee was that despite the decline in our caseload in this program, our investment in this program has continued to rise. So the actual expenditure for 2004-05 was \$336 million, and we are projecting an expenditure of \$348 million this year. So our numbers are going down, but our costs are going up. We think that's very positive because we're able to do more for the people who are left on income assistance and in need of the programs.

This slide will just provide some information on why the Employment Support and Income Assistance budget continues to increase and where it has increased. We have had increases for three years in income assistance. The third year, effective October 1st, earlier this month, was the third increase, a \$10 increase in the basic rate. We have introduced this year - the government has introduced a Pharmacare Program for children in low-income families, which we're very positive about and think it's a very good step. Government has also introduced a new program, which is the Harvest Connection program and other enhancements have been made, such as the income tax refund, the ability to retain 30 per cent of an income tax refund. We've had dental fee increases. We actually have a new program being introduced this morning by Minister Stretch.

I indicated earlier that the program is very multi-faceted, and it's actually a fairly complex program. This slide will just demonstrate the array of supports available to low-income families and individuals, and what they could receive. One of the attributes of the program, which I think is often overlooked when we hear media reports or criticisms of the program and the amount of money, it's often overlooked that we are able to assist individuals with unique needs through this program, through their special needs.

This slide is just a pictorial slide, which I think will just show one example of one category of our clients. I picked this one category, because it's often remarked upon, a single parent with one child. What are we able to provide to assist that person? This slide will indicate that if a single person - if you look at the second bar, just by way of example - and this is a single person who is not able to earn very much money but who does earn \$5,000, for example, that person will have access to an additional \$18,750. So \$18,750 in addition to the \$5,000, so \$23,750. When I say access to or eligibility, it will depend upon the person's need. So if the person needs employment supports, if the person needs child care, if the person needs transportation and Pharmacare, for example, those needs are met. So that would be the maximum but it does demonstrate that it is more than we often hear about. I often get very frustrated when I hear reports that we're giving single parents only \$5,000, or \$5,200, and that was in the news recently. As I pointed out earlier, it is often not taken - people don't take into account that there are other supports available, if a person needs them and is qualified to receive them.

So comparing that \$23,750 to a person who is not a client and who is strictly working for minimum wage, that person would earn \$15,000. So it is an interesting example. We could have examples of every single category but this one is one that people often are concerned about.

Just in closing on this overview, the Employment Support and Income Assistance Program is, I think, in many ways an effective mechanism which does help improve the lives of the clients that it serves. There are other programs in other government departments and elsewhere which also contribute to the social, economic, physical and mental well-being of our clients.

I don't know, Madam Chairman, if you want me to stop there or if you want me to just run through the recommendations and responses, or I'll leave that to you.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: What would the committee like to do? Do you want to ask some questions on some of the slides that have just been presented in that information? Or do you want to have the deputy review the original recommendations and give an update on what is happening? Keith.

MR. KEITH COLWELL: I'd like her to finish the presentation totally.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Okay, is everyone in agreement? If you don't mind, perhaps we'll continue then.

MS. TYSON: I'll just refer you - you all have just a one-page sheet, it is printed on both sides. There were seven recommendations we were asked to respond to and indicate how we were doing. I'm very pleased to say that we are making some very good progress on most of these recommendations, actually.

The first one was to have an independent review of the Employment Support and Income Assistance Act, including the appeal process and personal allowance rates. I've mentioned that personal allowance rates have increased three times. We do have an independent review of the employment support programs underway and an independent review of the income assistance. There was a report of the Auditor General, and Deloitte & Touche has been retained to assist the department in delving deeper into those recommendations and assisting us by recommending ways we can improve. We are also reviewing the appeal process and that has just started.

Recommendation No. 2 is in respect to post-secondary attendance. The recommendation was, and it has been talked about I think for the last few years since I have been in the Department of Community Services, that our clients on income assistance sometimes may be qualified and capable and want to improve their lives by attending post-secondary or university. We did have the ability to attend post-secondary two-year programs, community college for example. The minister today, in fact this morning, shortly, will be announcing a new program entitled Career Seek.

That will support income assistance recipients to attend university as well as other post-secondary programs.

Mike has a copy of the announcement that the minister will be making a little later this morning and he can provide that to everybody here. So I think that is a very positive step and it was recommended by many people.

The third recommendation is in respect of the housing allowance. This is a very complicated matter, I will say, but Harold Dillon can answer specific questions on this one. With the implementation of the shelter rates, when the implementation of the Act came into effect, the shelter rates became uniform across the province. We have, from time to time, looked at whether we should have different rates in different places. There are conflicting views on that, I will put it that way, so it has not been done to date. But on October 1st, our shelter rates increased for the second year in a row which was, again, a very positive step. They increased by \$15 for single people and \$20 for families, so that's the second year in a row.

Last year, single renters received a \$50 increase in their allowance and single boarders received a \$25 increase last year. So for two years in a row, government has been able to increase those shelter rates for housing.

The fourth recommendation was respecting notice. Again, this is even more complicated than shelter rates, I have to say. I've spent a bit of time talking with Janet Rathbun as to, what we give notice, how we give notice, when we give notice, and when we do and why we don't. I'll just say that it seems to me that we give as much notice as we can when we can, but it's not always possible to give notice. That sometimes is beneficial to clients because we don't want to hold up their income assistance relief, for some assistance and special needs. We wouldn't give notice in those circumstances. We also have the appeal period and the right to an advocate during that appeal period. I will leave detailed questions on that to Janet Rathbun.

The fifth was in respect of telephone service. Many of our clients - in fact, I think quite a few of our clients - do have telephones. We provide telephones as a special need. If there is a health issue or a safety issue, people are entitled as a special need to a telephone. In addition, we provide telephones for people who are seeking employment, if they need to have a telephone to receive calls or make calls in respect of gaining employment.

The sixth recommendation was in respect of a wage reduction. The recommendation was that the wage reduction should apply to earnings above \$3,000 per year and an annual review should take place. We do review annually all of these things. We have a number of wage incentives in place now that put more money in the hands of low-income Nova Scotians. For example, people who receive income assistance are able to keep 30 per cent of their earnings and as of October 1st, just this month, earlier, individuals who receive income assistance can also keep 30 per cent of

an income tax refund. That has been a bone of contention among our clients, among stakeholder groups, and also our staff were concerned about that and recommended that.

The Harvest Connection Program does also link - that's a new program that's just starting up this year. It links income assistance recipients to job opportunities during the harvest season. Individuals can earn an additional \$3,000 - so there's that \$3,000 figure - by harvesting crops such as apples, vegetables or Christmas trees and they can earn that on top of their basic assistance. So it's another step which will help people.

Finally, on the emergency fund, there was a recommendation that we need to reinstate the former emergency fund. I do think there's a lack of understanding about that because the old emergency fund didn't do nearly as much as we do now and didn't have nearly as much money available to it. Janet Rathbun can speak to that. We spend more than \$35 million in special needs. That really replaced the old emergency fund which was only, I think, about \$5 million; \$35 million versus \$5 million, roughly. So I think there's, perhaps, a lack of understanding what each of those does. I will stop there and thank you for the opportunity to provide this information.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Thank you very much. So now we can start our questioning. Who would like to go first? Keith?

MR. KEITH COLWELL: I have, over the years, being an MLA, seen many people in my constituency. One of the issues that always comes up is employment. Some people who are with Community Services can't be employed for medical reasons or whatever the case may be, they can't be employed. Those individuals, I don't think have a very bright future, unfortunately.

There's a large segment of the population, I believe, on community services who if they had just the right situation at the right time, those individuals could go to work, and long term. People I've dealt with are in all kinds of different situations. It may be someone needs some daycare to take a course, someone may need reliable transportation to get to and from a job, they need some training, or a combination of all of those things to put them together. But every time we seem to interact with the department - and the department has been very helpful in these cases, I'm not here to give the department a hard time, that's not the issue - we always seem to run into roadblocks.

[9:30 a.m.]

I remember a gentleman who came into my office one time and said, I want to take this electronics course. I knew the electronics course, and very few people could pass the course. He didn't even have his Grade 12. He did that. We worked very closely

with your department. He got his GED, went on and took the course, and now runs his own business. So, very successful.

MS. TYSON: That's a nice story. That's a nice result.

MR. COLWELL: It's a wonderful story, but it was sheer determination by him and his wife and his children to make all that happen. He did very well, and moved forward. But if I hadn't been there to help him along the way and to work with the department, and if the department hadn't been there to help, it would never have happened. I really give the department credit for that. It's one of those stories I'd like to see repeated thousands of times.

MS. TYSON: We sure would, too.

MR. COLWELL: The question I have to ask is, is the department really going to start looking at individuals and individual situations? I know you have a lot of people you have to deal with, and the caseworkers are, most days, really overworked, trying to handle a lot of the stuff that comes through and the issues with different individuals. But if we could just get a few more people in an employment situation that they're interested in - it has to be what they're interested in and really suits their skills or skills that you can develop. The university set-up that you have here is a positive step. I'm talking about other people who might be able to go take a truck driving course or it could be anything, tradesmen, anything.

What has the department done to ensure that you really look at individuals? In most of the cases, this is an individual situation and it may be something very simple that could change that person's life, and it may not be under your criteria. If it's not under your criteria, it just can't happen. Is there any provision for doing things like that?

MS. TYSON: I'll just make a general comment, and then ask Mike to give more specifics about what we can do in individual situations. The Act that we operate under is still fairly new. When it was introduced just a few years ago, there was a new added focus on the employment support part, so that the intention was to shift some of the focus from just giving people income to helping them in the way that you're suggesting. So there was a new focus on the Act. We have now reached the stage where it's timely, and it was recommended as well, to review that employment support part. We have had a fairly large, extensive consultation undertaken, and a report by independent consultants, to try to tell us some more about how our employment supports are working.

I hope that I will find, when I see that report, what I'm looking for, is what is working well, what is not working so well, so that we can emphasize and continue the supports that are working well and the programs that are working well, and either adjust the ones that aren't working so well or put that money into the ones that are working

well. So, I'm hoping that we'll find that. I haven't gotten the report yet, but we should have that report by the end of this calendar year. That will help us. I'm going to ask Mike to specifically talk about some of the individual supports that we have.

MR. MIKE TOWNSEND: That you for your question. I agree, when individuals receive support from a variety of different sources, I think it does tend to enhance the outcomes that they achieve. When the deputy described, in her presentation, that we have just under 30,000 income assistance recipients at the present time, on a yearly basis there are about 10,000 individuals who are participating in an employability plan of some kind. Last year, of those individuals, there were 2,000 who participated in literacy and upgrading programs; just under 4,000 who were involved in skills building, skills development programs of various kinds and about 3,100 individuals who found full-time or part-time work.

In relation to supporting that, of the \$35 million that was described as being committed to special needs, just under \$9 million of that was dedicated to supporting individuals to participate in that employment experience and that employment transition.

How things work generally is that an individual is linked to an employment counsellor. That employment counsellor walks through what we call the Nova Scotia Employability Assessment, which is a tool which is primarily designed to help the participant to understand their employment assets and barriers, and to develop a customized plan which will help them link to something that is realistic, given their skills and abilities, is appropriate given the circumstances of the labour market in their area or within the province, and also is doable and achievable from a skills and aptitude point of view.

[9:45 a.m.]

We have been very pleased with the outcomes we have achieved so far and I do agree with the deputy that we're looking forward to the results of the evaluation to find out how we can improve upon that. I am sure there are ways that we can enhance our program.

One thing that I will share with you in addition is that, often, it takes a very creative approach in today's economy. Given the circumstances of many of the income assistance recipients who you come in contact with, who have multiple challenges with respect to finding and maintaining work, that we need to think differently about how we will support them. One program in particular that I would highlight is called One Journey, which we operate in conjunction with the Department of Education, that allows us to identify individuals who typically do have multiple barriers, who, through access to literacy supports, skills training and job placements, have been very successful. What is unique about this program is that it is operated in conjunction with industry. Industry helps us to design the program, the training curriculum, offers

placements for participants as they transition through that and are very likely to offer full-time employment to those individuals when they complete the program. There may be other things we can do with information we glean from the evaluation.

MR. COLWELL: Will you make a copy of the report available, after you get it, to the committee?

MS. TYSON: Yes.

MR. COLWELL: Thank you. On that income and the support when people are going through this process, and I think it is a very positive step that you are doing this now, is there any subsidy that is paid to the employee from Community Services while they are starting and they are still learning how to do the job properly and maybe that slowly diminishes over time? Typically today, you need a lot of skill to work at even the least complex job,

I think that is probably the best way to do it. You need the skills training to do that and if you haven't worked in a while, it takes a while to get into the routine and to understand what employers want and to do those things and especially with the example you used here, if it is a single mom who has all kinds of barriers, it takes a while to get into the routine of working. An employer, of course, is not very forgiving because they have to run a business.

So is that sort of thing taken into consideration, too, and is there provision for that both financially and support-wise to do that? That is one of the key parts of this, to make sure that people get back into the workforce again.

MR. TOWNSEND: I think there are a few things that we could say in response to that. We do have staff, who we refer to as job developers, who work with industry and the employer community. Their role is to assist individuals to make the transition to employment, to understand what the needs are of employers and to help support employers in trying to provide a welcoming place for income assistance recipients as they transition to work.

In some cases it is also helpful to provide what we refer to as a wage subsidy. A wage subsidy provides funding directly to the employer to offset some of the costs that the employer will incur by providing increased supervision and helping to support the individual to a stage where they are performing at a level as they would expect other employees to perform at, who are going to be successful at that kind of work. Those supports are available through all of our district offices or where we have job search centres in conjunction with our district offices.

MR. COLWELL: Now when you talk about those supports . . .

MADAM CHAIRMAN: If you don't mind, I think we'll move on to some other questioners. Can you save that question for round two?

MR. COLWELL: Yes, I can.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Okay, thanks very much. Leo.

MR. LEO GLAVINE: Good morning, and thanks for being here today. There are always a lot of questions and issues in this field.

I was just wondering quickly, who is conducting the independent evaluation of the employment support system?

MR. TOWNSEND: Goss Gilroy Incorporated.

MR. GLAVINE: Thank you. Today the minister is announcing Career Seek which, of course, has been an area that I think both Opposition Parties certainly have been pushing for the last number of years and is very welcome, indeed. I was just wondering if you could at least give us a little sketch of where that . . .

MS. TYSON: I think Mike can do that because Mike has designed it and is responsible for that program.

MR. GLAVINE: Okay, thank you very much.

MR. TOWNSEND: Thank you for your question. Career Seek is an initiative which will allow, over four years, 200 income assistance recipients - 50 per year - to attend a program of more than two years - programs of three or four years. How it works is that individuals will be required to access all other sources of funding to support their learning plan, their educational path. Where there is a budget deficit, where their costs are greater than the resources they are able to acquire, Community Services will provide continued support for living expenses up to the normal income assistance threshold that individual would be familiar with.

We will work very closely with these individuals, in terms of assisting them to assess their educational opportunities, to make sure that they have the skills and abilities to successfully participate in the program of their choice, to make sure that there are appropriate labour market opportunities for them once they graduate and that we provide good, solid support to make sure that they transition to those opportunities in a successful and effective way.

MS. TYSON: I think if I could just add - I understand that this program is particularly helpful to single parents because those are the people who would have the gap and not have quite enough income to do that.

MR. TOWNSEND: Yes, that's correct. Those individuals who would be more likely to exhaust their student assistance, for example, and still have needs, Career Seek would be especially effective to support those people.

MR. GLAVINE: Thank you. One of the areas that came up last year during the two- day forum on poverty, a lot of questions and issues around housing. I know that, as a general rule of thumb, we talk about the housing allowance should be 85 per cent of rental market. I am just wondering what options are being explored in relation to shelter allowance?

MS. TYSON: I'm going to ask Harold to speak to that.

MR. HAROLD DILLON: Thank you. As the deputy said in her opening remarks, at the time the EISA Act was brought into effect - perhaps even before that when we had a combination of municipal and provincial social assistance systems - the issue of shelter allowance was pretty much a checkerboard pretty well across the province with areas with very low rates, areas with relatively high rates, significant differences among family compositions and so on.

I think one of the messages that was heard during the consultations leading up to the adoption of the Act was that uniformity should be introduced into the whole issue of shelter allowances. In fact, I believe, and I wasn't involved specifically at that time, certainly Janet was involved as a district manager perhaps at the time, the decision was made to go with the uniform set of shelter allowances for the entire province. As the deputy indicated in her opening remarks, there has been quite a bit of discussion since then as to whether or not that is the right model. Of course, we have different rates for different family sizes, singles, small families, large families.

We've been looking at what has been going on, particularly in the past two to three years around the marketplace. Anybody who is familiar with the HRM rental market knows that there has been significant spikes in some areas of HRM with the rental market, similarly in university towns and areas influenced by university student populations - Antigonish, I'm thinking of, Kings County in particular. There are some rental pressures there.

We have been looking at whether or not we should be making some suggestions or options to government on changing the uniform system to a different system. Each system you might go to has its own challenges. One of the underlying issues is the definition of market - when we talk about market, what do we mean by the market. In HRM alone, I believe the last statistics we got from CMHC indicated there are least 15 individual rental markets in HRM. So, if you try to devise a shelter allowance system that's responsive to the marketplace, do you respond to all 15 markets, perhaps maybe the HRM general average, which market are you in fact going to apply to?

So we are looking at it from that perspective. What are all these market forces, what is the best way to provide support to individuals so they can meet their shelter needs? Is it a formula based on a percentage of market? Is it a flat-rate system that will, in fact, drive the market rather than having the market drive the provincial rates, have the rates in fact influence the market? We're looking at all of those things. We've drawn no conclusions to date on any particular formula that might work better than the one we have now.

Another concern, of course, is if we dramatically increase the rent, the question is what's going to be the landlords' response to that? That's always a concern - how does the marketplace respond if we change our rent structure? We have to be very cautious about ensuring we take a balanced and strategic approach to this whole issue of shelter rates.

MR. GLAVINE: I guess the next part, for me, would be not so much the rates, but just the availability of affordable housing. I know the minister is looking after her riding today, a little bit more - I think it's today or tomorrow, Friday - with some senior openings down in Chester. Right now, the latest statistics that I have show that the Annapolis Valley has the greatest need of all for affordable housing. Being the MLA for Kings West, I deal with this issue on a weekly basis. We have a movement now of people who come in to harvest and try to stay on through the winter, do up an old outbuilding and so forth to get by with. We have a tremendous number of seniors who need placing.

I'm just wondering if there is any kind of a framework or a sketch of where you're going to address this very serious problem. I know it's becoming a major issue. I hear some talk at least of the minister going down to explore with concerned parties and individuals. The agency, I know, is becoming extremely frustrated. This is no secret, that the people who run the Kentville office, who run the Middleton office are in a deep state of frustration, to the point of saying, let's even separate Housing from Community Services. We need some help here. These are the people at the top who are now quietly, or when there's an occasion, expressing that to me, and I'm not even their MLA.

I am just wondering, where are we going here with this whole issue? I haven't seen anything in the four years since I became an MLA. I know in Cape Breton, they're in a worse state, in terms of at least having available housing and nothing being done to fix them up and get people back into them. It's a huge crisis area.

MS. TYSON: It is a challenge in Nova Scotia. We don't have the highest incomes in the country. We have some of the oldest stock in the country, and we have a high home ownership ratio in the country. It is a challenge. We have older stock, and the maintenance of that older stock is one challenge. I see that in the Valley, in western Nova Scotia, in terms of the statistics that we are gathering.

We're looking at, in particular, western Nova Scotia, which seems to be in more need in some areas than other places, although we do have needs throughout the province. We do have a number of programs. We spend a fair amount of money on housing every year. Mr. Dillon would be able to be more specific, I'm sure.

We have had some additional programs in the last couple of years that have helped. We had the Affordable Housing, Phase I, which was a federal-provincial program with partners. We have completed Phase I commitments on time, and that Phase I resulted in 928 additional housing units. We're in the process of just about starting Phase II. Phase II will enable us to do some more work on housing. It will follow somewhat from Phase I, be similar to Phase I, in terms of the types of initiatives that will be under Phase II.

The other positive event is the fact that the federal government is about to give us \$23 million in a housing trust. That will enable us to do even more. In addition, that will enable us to do some major renovation on some of our housing stock, which really needs additional work to keep it as viable housing stock. There are two trusts actually, a \$23 million trust in general, and I think there is a roughly \$8 million Aboriginal, off-reserve trust for the same purpose.

So we're looking forward to those things, which will help. It will not solve the problem but it will help. In addition, over the last two years, we have been very fortunate, I believe, in that government has recognized the problem, everybody is recognizing the problem, and has been able to put a fair amount more money, millions, particularly into home repairs. Two years ago, I remember discussing that if we had x dollars, we could eliminate the wait list, and we did, for one day, roughly. We did eliminate the wait list, but immediately, those people who were not on the wait list then came on - more people came on.

Last year, we were able to put more money, extra money which was not budgeted, into housing. I know that throughout the department the recommendation of our staff was that that was a considerable need, and our staff recommended that if there was additional money that they thought it should go to housing, where the need was even greater than some of the other areas that they administer. So there was a consensus among the department - government's decision, of course, but consensus - that extra money should be put into housing. Mr. Dillon would be able to answer specific questions in terms of numbers and types.

MR. DILLON: Perhaps if I could just interject, thank you, deputy. Specific to the Valley and the Affordable Housing Program, Phase I, we finished the program commitment, as the deputy has indicated, and interestingly enough - and it's perhaps no surprise to the members here - the western end of the province was one of the largest areas where we received requests for funding, and in fact I think it is probably the largest area of the province that received commitments under that program. When I say the western area of the province, I'm thinking from Kings/Lunenburg, west.

I believe in the statistics we've provided to some members of the Legislature, the Valley area received by far the largest part of that program, and that's because we received very good proposal calls in Wolfville, the Kentville area, down in the Middleton area, down through the Valley. A little bit of history. At the time the Social Housing Program was being delivered in the 1970s-through-1990s era, there was not a lot of demand for social housing through the Valley. Anybody who has been around that long knows the Valley was always a reasonably prosperous area, pretty self-sufficient. During that formative time of public housing being developed, not a lot of public housing went into the Valley, particularly not for families. Quite a few units for seniors were built.

But the Valley has grown dramatically, the population has grown dramatically, and maybe the economy is not performing quite as well as it used to. So we now have demand coming out of the Valley that did not exist during the time most of the Social Housing Program was being developed. So the Affordable Housing Program and the trust will give us an opportunity and a tool to maybe respond to the need that's going on in the Valley and other similar areas of the province that perhaps didn't exist at the time the Social Housing Program was being delivered. So maybe that will help explain some of the longer-term dynamics there.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Trevor.

MR. TREVOR ZINCK: Thank you. I'd like to start by saying that I'm a new MLA, I've been in for about four months now, four and a half months. I have to honestly say that my constituency office and my CA have had and developed an ongoing beneficial relationship with all the supervisors in Dartmouth. I've been able to help several people. So I'm not here to down them, for sure.

There are a couple of questions in relation to my colleague across the table, who earlier had mentioned wanting to see more involvement from individual caseworkers. I've seen, early on, a lack of investigation in regard to dealing with certain situations, and it is part of my frustration, as well. What I would recommend, or would like to recommend, is that when an individual finds themselves disadvantaged and has to approach the government for assistance, I would love to see a caseworker who is not a social worker - and that could be part of the problem - have the ability to spend the time and guide that person through every step to get them on to that next level. That is part of my frustration that I have seen.

A lot of times when a person approaches the assistance, they fill out the application, they qualify, they get a cheque, and a lot of people don't know there are certain things out there, they're not guided, necessarily. So I guess I'd like to see some more - I honestly believe it would help the caseload, if a caseworker is given that time to spend with someone who is new to the system, to go in there and actually work with them, point them in the right direction, take them to actual employment services workers as well, and guide them through the steps, because when someone gets to that

point, that low, that they have to reach out for assistance, they might not have the confidence to take the steps or seek out the knowledge to find these other programs.

In regard to housing, Mr. Dillon, you had mentioned the markets. Currently in HRM, we have a huge issue with two rental companies, Killam Properties and TransGlobe. Over the last two years, I would estimate probably between the two of them, over 30,000 units are owned in HRM alone. In Dartmouth North, I moved there four years ago, and the rents there, it was pretty much a destination place in Dartmouth North. Sixty per cent of our community is multi-unit dwelling. So anybody who was looking for affordable housing was able to find it there, whether they were on assistance or not.

What we have now is a real situation. We have two companies that have captured the market. Rents right now in Dartmouth North, in the more upscale buildings, let's say more livable arrangements, are currently going for anywhere from \$550 to \$625 for a one bedroom. To me, when I'm dealing with somebody who's on assistance, I guess the frustration that the department has to understand - and I'm sure you've heard it - is what people find themselves in, the situation they find themselves in, and the reason why we have food banks is because whether it's a single parent who, as we see by the scale here, with one child can receive up to \$570 a month. It doesn't really allow them to live.

Keep in mind, when you are in a situation where you have to be at your lowest to approach assistance, for whatever reason, these people need a pickup. The \$570 is great, but it points them in one direction that they go in, and it's not an ideal situation. At a recent AGM for Capital Health, they came out with six key points to healthy living, and one of the key points was a solid housing foundation, and income was another really key point.

I guess what I'm trying to say is whether I'm a single male or female, who I believe receives \$300 for a shelter allowance - am I correct? I don't see it in the chart.

MS. TYSON: Yes, that's correct. The more common is \$535.

MR. ZINCK: Therein lies part of the frustration, and I honestly don't know how you gauge it. The government has taken steps to increase it. But what the department and government have to understand is that if I approach assistance, I'm at my lowest, for whatever reason, and that money does not enable me to have the quality - \$300 right now in HRM will put you in a situation that's not really going to benefit you. When you're talking about a single parent, \$570 is not going to allow you to live in the right sort of circumstances to help uplift you and bring you out of that. Therefore, what happens, although there was a \$10 increase in the personal allowance, people find themselves taking it out of other sources of money, which is directly the personal allowance.

I work at a food bank every Wednesday and I can tell you right now that the majority of the people are single parents who find themselves on assistance. The majority of people who come to our food bank are people on assistance. I have to ask myself why. It's because they're taking money out of their personal allowances. Ten dollars is great, it's not enough. It's not enough for the cost of living now and the housing. I'm telling you right now, in Dartmouth North, \$600 is what TransGlobe is charging for a one-bedroom apartment in the majority of their buildings. They're finishing the outsides and you know what, congratulations, it's beautifying our neighbourhood a bit, but for anybody, whether it be a senior - and our population in Dartmouth North of seniors is 4 per cent, they're moving out. We don't have a seniors' foundation anymore in our community, they can't afford to live.

[10:00 a.m.]

For people on assistance, Dartmouth North used to be a key because of the availability for apartments, it's 60 per cent multi-unit dwellings, but now it's unaffordable. So what do we do? Where do we point these people? Therein lies the frustration. You have to be hearing that. So where do we put them? Where do we put people who can't afford to live?

The problem right now is there has to be some sort of mechanism in there that we can - and, Mr. Dillon, you mentioned it about the landlords, if we top it up. Well, let's put some sort of protection in there that won't allow landlords - because that's what happens as well. TransGlobe/Killam moves in and every other landlord, every other slum landlord - and I have a beautiful part of my neighbourhood that the Minister of Justice is going to visit this afternoon and it contains about six to 10 boarded-up buildings - but every other slum landlord around there has raised their rents. That's where the filter goes. People can't afford to live in the nicer buildings anymore, people on assistance, seniors, who have come to our community are either moving out or to those lower slum buildings, but the rents are rising there.

Housing is crucial, and whether we build more housing stock - and I know about the maintenance, too, because in Scotia Court and Nova Court, I mean we have heard of people in that situation and again, the frustration lies in - if I approach the government for help at my lowest point, I want to know and I need to know, I have to be lifted up because my spirits are gone.

I applaud the many, many programs that are being offered now, but I'll go back to my colleague and what he said - individuals. I think over the years what has happened is we've herded everyone together and we've labelled them with numbers and until we look at situations and really reach out to people in need, no one is really ever going to move on to that point. I just don't see enough of that happening and in housing right now, whether it be a lack of affordable housing or financing, I cannot tell you the frustration when I have a single parent or someone in need come to a food bank and we don't even have enough food to get them through a week. They've already received

their cheque and they're halfway through the month and we can feed them only one time a month, we allow them only one time a month.

The government has to understand, and that's where the outcry lies, when we say it's not enough, these people are existing. How is somebody living off \$7,800 or \$5,000 a year? If they don't qualify for other programs, these people are existing. You know what, I make a nice salary, but you know what? Every day I walk from my office to my house, I'm frustrated because I have to get elected and these people - I'm sorry. These people are going to say to me in two or three years, what have you done to lift my spirits up? What have you done? Why should I vote for you?

MS. TYSON: I understand exactly what you're saying. We hear from people daily, as well as I know everybody in this room does - and there are many challenges. The housing, that's one of our largest challenges.

Those were very moving comments.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: I wonder, should we take, perhaps, a five minute recess? Is that okay?

MS. TYSON: Sure.

[10:04 a.m. The committee recessed]

[10:11 a.m. The committee reconvened]

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Could I invite everyone to take their seats?

MR. DILLON: Madam Chairman, I could provide a short response to some of the MLA's concerns, if you'd like, or at your leisure.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: If it's very brief, because I know there are several other people who want to ask questions.

MR. DILLON: Okay. Sure, I'll keep it very brief.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Thank you.

MR. DILLON: We, much like Mr. Zinck and others in their own constituencies, tend to keep an eye on what's happening in the marketplace and the marketplace is a huge influence of what goes on in everybody's lives, not to mention its influence on government policy, practice and so on. We've been monitoring some of this consolidation of ownership rental stock. Certainly, it's something that happens in the marketplace and all sorts of things. Not just in Dartmouth North. There's consolidation

in the lower affordability housing sectors in many communities across the province, so we monitor that.

We will also, perhaps, be discussing Service Nova Scotia and Municipal Relations. Service Nova Scotia and Municipal Relations, as you're aware, is responsible for the Residential Tenancies Act and the whole issue of relationships between landlords and tenants. On the broader community-wide level, perhaps, they, I suspect, are also monitoring some of this activity. So we'll undertake to have some discussions with those folks around what's going on in the marketplace and whether they have any thoughts or ideas. Thank you.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Thank you so much. With the committee's indulgence, I would like to ask a few questions. I was prepared to ask Keith to take over. We don't have a formal Vice-Chairman currently. Keith has suggested that, perhaps, I just give myself a time limit and he'll keep me on track but if you prefer, I can exchange seats with him. Okay? Give me seven or eight minutes, okay?

MR. COLWELL: To be specific, 10:20 a.m. (Laughter)

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Okay, 10:20 a.m. Madam Deputy, I understand the progress that your department is making but I share my colleague's frustration and sense of pain. As I have said many times to you and your department officials, about 80 per cent of my casework is the result of problems that clients are having with the department.

The gap in the appearance of the amount of money that's going into these programs - the gap between that and the reality that I see every single day from the men and women crying across the table because they can't cope is absolutely unbelievable. We heard those stories and that pain, time and time again, during the presentations on the Forum on Poverty. I have just pulled together some of their comments and I would like to just list a few of them because this is the stark reality that these people are living every single day.

[10:15 a.m.]

To me, it's a motivator that the approach we're using is not working. We can't just increase something by \$5 or \$10 a paycheque, a band-aid here, or do this there. We have to develop an anti-poverty or poverty reduction strategy. It just doesn't involve your department, I realize that. It certainly involves, well, all of government.

This is what we heard last January: that 80 per cent of Nova Scotians are worse off than in 1980; that provincial income assistance rates were lower in terms of what they can purchase than 1989 ones; that the highest increase in food bank usage in Atlantic Canada was in Nova Scotia- it's the third highest in Canada; 16.1 per cent of the population in Nova Scotia is low-income; and the worst of all, and this has been

verified by national studies, is that Nova Scotia poor are the poorest in Canada - 40,000 children are living in poverty in our province, half in single-parent families. Almost 40 per cent of food bank users are youth and children under 18 years. We have the widest low-income gender gap - that is more women are poor than men - in Canada, and that one in six women are living in poverty in our province, especially single mothers and single senior women. That's the information. It was backed up by statistics and stories.

So how do we grasp the reality between where they're living and what we're hearing today in your presentation? There's a huge gap there, because income or adequate income is probably the biggest determinant and predictor of poor health. It's impacting - we're spending the money down the road, so why not invest it when people need it to allow them to improve their health status, to improve their education and their work opportunities?

We need an infusion of money in the right place at the right time. It has to happen sooner rather than later. That's why our committee has been pushing this task force, or whatever you want to call it, where government and community and people on low incomes can work together to develop a strategy. It's a shared responsibility. We understand that, but it has to start sooner rather than later.

When I look at this graph, I find it very confusing. At first glance, it's suggesting to me that the Department of Community Services has programs available for people making \$35,000. I'm sure that's not what you're suggesting. I've never heard of anyone making that amount of money who has had access to social assistance. Being eligible for a program doesn't mean they're actually going to get it. We know the child care situation in Nova Scotia is horrendous - 75 to 80 per cent of people who need licensed child care in this province can't get it. So even though you might be eligible for child care doesn't mean you're actually going to have access to it.

It looks here as though Pharmacare for children of low-income families is the same amount of money no matter how much money you bring in. Is that true? That's not my understanding of the situation. I just find that graph unhelpful and misleading, and I'd like to get some actual figures on that. What is the income cut-off for social assistance?

MS. TYSON: I think Harold worked on it.

MR. DILLON: If you look at the chart, the very left-hand end of the chart indicates the kinds of basic services somebody could be eligible to receive. Some of them are automatic entitlement, like basic assistance, and some of them are based on individual need. So that left-hand column is the entire range, from child tax benefits to Pharmacare, special needs and so on.

As a person moves into the labour force and starts to earn income, the next bar, I believe, is \$5,000, \$10,000 - we've just demonstrated \$10,000 increments. As you

may be aware from the program, there are wage incentives that allow you to retain progressively fewer benefits as your income rises. I think at about the \$20,000 or \$25,000 range, most of their basic supports have been removed, but they continue to have access to child tax benefits, extended Pharmacare, or transitional Pharmacare. At that point, if they're in the workforce, in a full-time job, making \$30,000 a year, we will continue to extend IA benefits, like extended Pharmacare, for them for an additional year.

This chart demonstrates that even if they move into the workforce and eventually get a fully-employed, self-sustaining job, we are still there with the extended Pharmacare, or transitional Pharmacare, for a further 12 months. That's why the chart goes up to \$35,000. It does show that we stay with them, even into a fairly high income.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: For one year.

MR. DILLON: If you look at the coloured chart, where the red on there shows it disappears, that's where their basics have been eliminated through the replacement by wages. The child tax benefit starts to decline at some point, I think it's around \$20,000 a year. The federal child tax benefit package doesn't decline up to, I think, around \$100,000 a year. That's the explanation.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Just one quick question before I pass it over. Are homeless people eligible for social assistance? My understanding is no. If they don't have a residence . . .

MR. DILLON: In order to be eligible for income assistance, you have to have an address.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: So part of the reason your rolls are going down may be because there are more homeless people in Nova Scotia. Maybe - I'm not saying it is.

MR. DILLON: I don't think it's a significant factor. Most individuals who are homeless are homeless temporarily. They could be - for example, their address could be the Metro Turning Point in Halifax. That would be a sufficient shelter address, and in which case they would be eligible for income assistance, or any of the shelters or supportive housing projects. That would qualify them for income assistance.

The only people who effectively can't become eligible is somebody who either has no address or refuses to provide an address. We require, in fact I think it's the only measure, an address.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: How do you check that address? That's where the cheque goes, right?

MS. JANET RATHBUN: If I could just add to that. For someone who doesn't have a permanent place of residence, if they're staying with family or friends, a caseworker will go to see them in the home and do an assessment. Or if they're in a shelter, we have staff who work with the shelters, as well, who will go there to try to support them, offer them suggestions on places they could go, or find out what some of their presenting needs are. There may be addictions of some sort, they may need a treatment program. Those would be individual assessments. I'm not saying we've resolved the homeless situation by any means, but I'm saying that we do have staff and we do try to work with people to help them find permanent accommodation.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: I think Gordie is next on the list. Sorry, Leo, did you indicate for the second round?

MR. GLAVINE: Yes.

MR. GORDON GOSSE: Again, I would like to thank the Department of Community Services for coming here today. It's a very emotional topic. I think as MLAs when you get elected you don't realize this department consumes about 75 per cent of your time, from your office duties and whatever else. It's a very emotional and touchy subject when people are living in poverty. I remember when Canada signed the United Nations agreement in 1990 on the elimination of child poverty. At that time, there were about 500,000 children living in poverty, and now it's like 1.3 million children living in poverty in Canada. We haven't done a very good job as parliamentarians, or a very good job in the department, to alleviate some of these problems.

My first question is on the recommendation on the telephone aspect. When somebody comes to the department with documentation to provide for health reasons or whatever reasons - I know of a case where the client had brought in a slip from the doctor saying that the person needs a phone because of health reasons. The caseworker said, no, the person is not going to get a phone because it's not detailed enough, the documentation, to provide that phone. Have you heard of those situations within your department?

MS. RATHBUN: Certainly, we would assist someone if they have a medical requirement. Just as an example, if their children have asthma or they have a condition that requires it, it would be health and safety. We ask that they provide a note from their family physician.

MR. GOSSE: I know that, but what I'm saying is that when they provide the note from the family physician, that the family needs a phone, then the caseworker says, well, it's not documented enough. I've had a prescription given to the caseworker, and the caseworker says, no, this is not enough documentation, when it's written on a prescription pad. I took a photocopy of it, sent it off to the department, and still they're saying, this is not sufficient documentation.

The bureaucracy is what I'm trying to get through and as an MLA, as these things happen, this is how they end up in your office. The same thing with the announcement of the program today. You said the Minister of Community Services, Judy Streach, is going to announce today, I think the name of the program should have been the Bill Estabrooks career seek program, because Bill was championing this case for many years before I even came to the Legislature.

Again, when you did the presentation, all access of funding - it's like when you're 18 years old and you go to Community Services, and the department says you have to exhaust all access of where you're living, documentation, your parents are gone, whatever else, it's always documentation and bureaucracy to provide these programs. It makes it very difficult. It came to the point in my office that I can no longer speak to caseworkers, I have to call caseworker supervisors to deal with issues, because I can't even get some of these answers. But the access of funding for somebody who is a single parent and wanting to go to university and the program is going to be announced today, how is the bureaucracy going to be cut?

I have a young girl who actually lives two streets away from me - I live next to public housing - and she went back to become a nurse. Right away, as soon as she got her student loan, she is cut off community services. She is now going to school to become a nurse and cannot - all she lives on is child tax credit to pay her rent and pay for her son. I'm wondering, would that person be eligible now? She is in nursing. And becoming a nurse and making good money, she would pay back the Province of Nova Scotia and the government all that money in taxes. So I mean I hear from people each and every day who are saying, I'm in the system, I can't get out of the system. The system is not built for me to get off the system. The bureaucracy and the roadblocks or anything else and I can't get off that system. I'd just like to know in my case of my neighbour who's going to take nursing, a single mother of a nine-year-old son, would she benefit from this program right now, as it's introduced today?

By the way, her parents are actually helping her, so is that going to be a problem with that, all aspects of accessing funding. I mean, if your parents have money and you're a single parent and you don't live there, should your parents be responsible? So is it going to go down like the same way that the department announces this program and then it gets tied up in bureaucracy, and MLAs are calling and saying, why isn't this person eligible?

MR. TOWNSEND: I would encourage that individual to - as soon as this information is released, over the next 24 to 48 hours we will be working with our staff to inform them about the details of the program. As soon as that's done, I would encourage this individual to speak to her caseworker and be directed to one of our employment staff who can assess whether or not she would be eligible for this Career Seek pilot project, and we would do that as quickly as possible. For those individuals who are going to be sort of through the first days of this process, we would be able to support them as early as January.

Now with respect to the assessment of what constitutes other sources of funding, we would not take into consideration having to apply to parents as part of the envelope that they would need to exhaust before we would consider providing top-up assistance in relation to income assistance support and access to special needs.

MR. GOSSE: My next question would be for Harold Dillon. I just wanted to ask you a question about the federal-Nova Scotia Affordable Housing Program. I'm quite familiar with that in my critic area, but I'm just wondering, would you have the stats on how many of those units have been built in Cape Breton?

MR. DILLON: I didn't bring the affordable housing stats with me today, but right off the top of my head, out of the 928 units that were delivered under the Affordable Housing Program across all the programs, Home Preservation, Rental Preservation and New Rental Construction, I would guesstimate the total number of the units that went into Cape Breton Island, as a whole, would be somewhere between 150 and 200 units out of the 928.

MR. GOSSE: What I'm asking is new, affordable housing units, rental units.

MR. DILLON: Oh, you want specifically to deal with new rental. I don't have the data with me on new rentals, but I do know . . .

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Perhaps you could provide it at a later date.

MR. DILLON: We can certainly provide that information to you.

MR. GOSSE: The answer will be zero.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Thank you. Does anyone who hasn't asked a question in round one want to speak now, or shall we move on to round two? Ron, yes.

[10:30 a.m.]

HON. RONALD CHISHOLM: Thank you very much and thank you to the Department of Community Services for coming in here today. As has been said before, it is a very emotional issue. I mean, we all have the same problems, the same concerns in all of our ridings right across the province. I know in Guysborough-Sheet Harbour, I'm no different, I have a very large African Nova Scotian community in Guysborough, I have a Native reserve in the Sheet Harbour area - there are issues in those areas as well. I think we have come quite a way in Guysborough County - our housing programs. We get as many as we possibly can get, as far as grants, improvements to housing for seniors and low-income people in the riding. So I know there is a lot more to be done but there is - we certainly have, I feel, come a long way.

The issue on the Pharmacare, the new Children's Pharmacare Program, can you explain a little bit more, just expand on it?

MS. RATHBUN: Certainly. The new, what we call, low-income program for children, the goal of that is to continue to provide Pharmacare coverage for families who are not on income assistance. It has been identified as one of the barriers for people moving off assistance into the workforce, particularly if they're working at minimum wage or low income. Although we do provide the extended or transitional Pharmacare - as mentioned, that usually goes for one year - this program will continue. It's based on the same guidelines as with the child tax credit, with the Nova Scotia child benefit, which is around \$20,000. So what they would do is the children of those families would qualify. Applications were sent out to them at the first of the Fall, and they're in the middle of processing the applications that have come back.

MR. GOSSE: The Pharmacare Program, the \$50 million program, is different than the new child care program. The new child care program will cover people not necessarily on assistance.

MS. RATHBUN: That's correct.

MR. GOSSE: Just low income, working families, or . . .

MS. RATHBUN: That's correct.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Anyone else for round one? If not, Leo.

MR. GLAVINE: In terms of the housing trust, the new one that's going to be coming out, is that a matching program by the provincial government? We know the previous program of \$34 million was an absolute disaster. The province built only about 200 units at most, out of \$34 million that the federal government made available. A great opportunity to change the course of affordable housing in this province, but the province did not match the dollars. This \$23 million, who will administer it? What is the timeline to roll this out?

MS. TYSON: We thought Phase I was a successful program. It was intended to be . . .

MR. GLAVINE: How could it be successful, when only a fraction of the \$34 million made available to Nova Scotia by the federal government was ever used?

MS. TYSON: The terms of the program were that it was a program that the federal program put in 50 per cent of the money, and the province and partners put in the other 50 per cent. So we had great partnerships that allowed us to meet that provincial partner commitment. Moving on to the trust, the \$23 million, that's straight federal dollars and no cost sharing is required.

MR. GLAVINE: Just as an example, again, the last three cases of housing I'm dealing with, the one most current is a mom will be able to get her children back if she

has housing. A family living in a tent up until last week and to get them in a place before winter - we got Cobequid Housing to deal with that. The other one is a family in affordable housing had a fire in the Lincoln Street apartments and are somewhat fearful of going back because, again, affordable housing has the minimum standard of one door in the unit, and they just barely got out. Why would Nova Scotia provincial housing put up the minimum standards for the housing and the building codes?

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Actually, I'm going to interrupt here just to remind members that our next meeting, we're inviting some of the same people back, because we're going to do the Affordable Housing Agreement. So we'll have more time and opportunity then, perhaps, to get into a lot of detail. Today's focus, while we generally have a lot of leeway once we have department officials in front of us, is on the recommendations. Perhaps, Harold, you could give just a very brief reply, because I don't want to take too much time away from the recommendations.

MR. DILLON: Yes, a short reply. The entire funding for the Affordable Housing Program, Phase I has all been committed; all \$37.3 million, between the feds, the province and its partners. So there's no money left that wasn't spent. It may not all be spent, but it has all been committed. Some of it is with lawyers in trust to be spent for projects under construction and so on, but it is all committed. Every penny of it will be advanced to serve Nova Scotians. It's 928 units, the total count, including over 500 new affordable housing units, and the rest are renovated units or preserved units in rural areas and so on.

The units that the department funds through its social housing program - public housing - are all built to National Building Code standards of the day. They all were fully compliant with all the - some might refer to them as minimum standards - they are the standards, the standards of virtually all residential construction that happens in the country, so whether somebody refers to them as minimum, or whatever, they are the residential standards that exist for the country.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Thank you very much. Is it okay to move on to Keith, because we have two other items, we're going to have to break a little early to cover. Thanks, Leo.

MR. COLWELL: Okay, I was talking about the income support for employment. How long does your program continue for now? I ran a business before I got into politics, and I found when you hired an employee who needed extensive training, it took a long time for that to happen, so that they would become productive and be someone who could start generating money for the company so the company could grow and hire more people.

What's the longest period of time, and is there a graduated system for that, so that in the early stages when the employee is really just beginning to learn, and as they

get more and more proficient, that maybe the department could reduce the income support? Is there a program for that? What time duration would it be?

MR. TOWNSEND: In relation to the employment supports, our preference is that we ensure that individuals are ready to work and have the skills to work when they arrive at the employer's door. With the wage subsidy provision that we were talking about earlier, the normal time period over which that applies is usually six months and it often is a sliding arrangement where the bulk of the monies are provided up front, when the employer is incurring most of the expense in terms of helping to train and orientate that person to the job.

There can also be very unique and customized circumstances around that particular individual where it's a true training on-the-job situation which may extend support for a longer period of time.

MR. COLWELL: Well, typically I find - and nothing has changed - that when you get somebody from the community college, they still need more training on the job. Unfortunately, that's the case. That is an issue we should attack another day, because there are some really serious issues around community college training now that I'm hearing back from constituents.

In reality, if you get someone - I was in a manufacturing situation, you get someone in a manufacturing situation in six months they're not up to speed, they're simply not up to speed. If they're not up to speed in six months and the subsidy is gone and if they're marginal, you'll keep them on if the improvement is there but if the improvement isn't there, someone who can improve to that point - I'm not saying paying huge subsidies, I'm not saying that, but just to make sure the person can get the training they need. I think it has to be flexible and open-ended.

You really have to assess the person, it has to go back to the individual again because some people learn faster than others. Some people have a better mechanical aptitude or a retail aptitude or whatever the case may be. I think it really has to be done to that because if you're going to be successful, you take the person out of the system, which with any individual I have ever talked to, no matter who they are or what their situation is, they don't want to be in the system. Some people, because of their health or whatever, have no choice, unfortunately, but you have got to sort of hand-hold all the way through until they become independent.

It's not just the job situation, it's the home situation, too, that you have to look at. If there's a child at home who needs care and daycare isn't available, it's a problem for the employer. Transportation, as I said before, is a problem. If you don't have a bus route they can get on or other transportation, it's a problem.

So what have you done to really look at that whole picture? That really makes a difference to the person succeeding or not. I don't ever want to see someone not

succeed because if they go through that process and they fail, and they have failed before, they will probably never come back again and that's the sad part of it. I wouldn't want to see someone who goes that far to be lost in the process.

MR. TOWNSEND: I think some of the experiences you have had are related to the changes in the circumstances of individuals who are in receipt of income assistance. At one time, Employment Support Services was able to provide support to individuals who already had intact work experience and intact training, and they moved very successfully into the labour market without a large or extended intervention, as you described is sometimes required now. One of the reasons why I think you've identified that situation is that the group of individuals who are now participating in employment services have more barriers than individuals who we may have served in the past. It's requiring us to rethink some of our strategies in terms of how we best link those people to the labour market.

The intervention or the initiative I mentioned earlier, One Journey - even though we have not been doing it on a large scale at this point, we have had projects throughout the province. What's very reassuring about that particular initiative is that industry partners are involved very early on and are involved in the screening of participants before they even join the initiative and they provide advice to us throughout in terms of what the standards should be, in terms of the training, what are the real life expectations in terms of what those individuals were experiencing when they actually hit the job.

Those employer partners are directly working with those participants throughout the entire duration. That has been extremely successful in assisting individuals with higher barriers to understand what their responsibilities and obligations will be when they actually get to the job, and during the project helping us to demonstrate with them, as much as we can, what those demands are going to be and making sure that they're ready for that.

MR. COLWELL: I think it's very positive because it has to be in conjunction with the individual, your department and the industry. I know some industries are doing that very successfully and I commend them for doing that. What is your success rate?

MR. TOWNSEND: The success rate in One Journey, this initiative that we were describing? Or overall, for Employment Support Services?

MR. COLWELL: The overall.

MR. TOWNSEND: Overall for Employment Support Services, I guess we'll hope that the evaluation will provide much greater clarity on this and will provide more exact information. If we look at some of our individual interventions, in terms of skills development, et cetera, individuals participating in post-secondary programs of one and two years, they are successful to the rate of approximately 70 per cent of either

eliminating entirely or reducing their reliance on income assistance on a long-term basis.

On One Journey, it's a similar percentage and we're very happy with that, given that participants in One Journey have very significant barriers to employment. I think, in terms of the overall picture, we'll have to wait until the evaluation results are complete so that we can provide very specific details on what they have assessed our long-term and our overall success rates have been.

MR. COLWELL: Have you looked at a cost analysis to see how much money you can invest in an individual before the return comes back and the income taxes or the other taxes they would pay? That's not a fair way to do this because individuals are more important than the dollars and cents, but when you're budgeting and you're requesting money from government, if you had figures like that it would help to get more funding, to help more of these programs and ultimately to help more people. Have you got a costing on that and a comparison? Have you ever done that comparison?

MR. TOWNSEND: That's also something that we'll anticipate from the evaluation.

MR. COLWELL: That's good, because I think it is money well invested. If you can get one or two individuals every month a permanent, full-time job, they can look after their family. To the family, from people I have dealt with, they are elated. Their mental health is a whole lot better and our system is a lot better. So anything you can do to improve those programs, I think will go a long way, not that it's going to cure all the problems that you have, but at least it will take some people out of that system.

[10:45 a.m.]

Is there anything you'd like to see the government do that they're not doing now to improve the process in this regard?

MR. TOWNSEND: Employment Support Services has come together over a period of time and its current configuration has been in place since 2001. This evaluation that we described is the first full-scale evaluation of employment services. It's also at a very critical time, given that the labour market is changing, the circumstances of individuals in receipt of income assistance is changing, in terms of the barriers they are experiencing in being able to transition to employment. Our expectation is that we will be using this evaluation to point the way forward to identify programs and services that are perhaps not being as effective as they were at one time, to point out initiatives that would be more helpful in terms of helping to link people to employment, to develop important skills for life and for work, and to use that as a foundation or a launchpad to reshape the way that we currently deliver that program for Income Assistance recipients.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: There are two other questioners, so do you mind if we move on? Trevor.

MR. ZINCK: Under Recommendation No. 7, the emergency funds, the deputy minister has spoken about, before it used to be \$5 million and now you're saying it is more. The special needs budget, can you just go over, once again, the breakdown? When you're talking special needs, you're talking special diets, transportation, child care?

MS. TYSON: Yes. Special medical needs. If somebody needs work boots in order to go into the woods and cut trees, so clothing.

MR. ZINCK: Where do emergency funds come into the special needs? And, what percentage of that makes up the actual budget that is currently out?

MS. RATHBUN: Certainly, the emergency fund, as it was referred to in the former Family Benefit Program, I was curious about that because I didn't know what was totally meant by it. When I researched it, I found out in fact it was accessed through the Vocational Rehab funds, and it was for mobility items. So, if you required a wheelchair, if you required special shoes or something of that nature, and there was a limit on it and it would often be depleted midyear or a quarter of the year through, then what they would do is refer it back to municipalities for the remainder of special needs for the rest of that year.

With the implementation of the new program under Employment Support and Income Assistance, we don't have, per se, an emergency fund access - unless you wanted to call all special needs - to these types of resources. If any individual or family has a special need for the items the deputy has referred to - it could be just about anything, you've talked to your constituents, so you know the range of supports and requests they have - we will do an assessment on each one of those.

You asked about the figure. The total figure is around \$35 million. Then it's broken up - there is no set amount for each item. We assess it as to what the need is.

MR. DILLON: If I could add a little further, there isn't so much a budget for special needs, in case you're thinking, well, when the \$35 million is depleted, there's no more. Special needs are provided based on the unique needs of an individual, and if less than \$35 million is required annually to support it, or more, the amount that is spent is a function of the needs that show up at our door.

MR. ZINCK: I have one other question. The new Harvest Connection Program - a lot of the people who find themselves seeking help are single parents, and a lot of them have disabilities. Has the government received an actual number of how many people have benefited from the recent program?

MR. TOWNSEND: It's very early on. We anticipated that this Fall would be a bit of an experiment from that point of view, in terms of gauging what the potential demand could be, both from producers and also from Income Assistance recipients who are interested. We're not going to be able to conduct a full review of this until probably this time next year, when we've actually gone through a full harvest cycle.

MR. ZINCK: Has the government put their focus with this program on a specific region of the province, or is it extending the invitation to the wider population?

MR. TOWNSEND: There's no particular geographic orientation to this whatsoever. So, any agricultural producer who is registered with the Department of Agriculture or any Christmas tree producer who is registered with the Christmas Tree Council, is eligible to hire Income Assistance recipients and for those individuals to receive the benefit.

MR. ZINCK: That leads me to my final question. I have a single parent and an able-bodied person who finds themselves in need at the time, living in Dartmouth North. How are they to take advantage of this program that's offered in the Valley? Would there be monies made available for child care and transportation to get them there, perhaps housing them in the Valley if they wanted to take advantage of this?

MR. TOWNSEND: This is considered to be a supplemental benefit for individuals. If they are able to, and wish to participate in it, they can receive the benefit of up to \$3,000 in wage income, without it impacting their income assistance entitlement. There are no support provisions attached to the initiative which would, for example, provide transportation to a harvest site in another part of the province.

MR. ZINCK: I guess that's part of the issue that I have with this program, actually, is that for anybody living in the HRM region, they would pretty much have to relocate to take advantage of something like this because chances are that they don't have transportation. A single parent isn't going to uproot from Dartmouth North or Halifax and go down and try to take advantage of this program. So I guess I'd like to see more programs, or an opportunity like this, for people who are in the different regions because really it doesn't apply here. Unless I can relocate somebody in the Valley to take advantage of this - are they going to relocate for two months or three months and then move back?

Then you have the situation where the special needs come in, are they going to have the money to move back, or are they going to stay there? The single parent thing - you're ruling that out with this program and it is unfortunate because there are people who I have talked to who want to take advantage of it, but they are not prepared to move, especially a single parent. You are not going to uproot a family to go harvest trees, most of them being single mothers. I just question the - I would like to see actually the numbers when they do come in, if possible, of how many people actually took

advantage of the program. If no one is taking advantage of it, I guess I question the validity of it. Is it necessary or are we just putting it out there to say that we did it?

MR. TOWNSEND: We will be reviewing the harvest on an ongoing basis and so we'll also be watching for the numbers, both on the producers' side and on the income assistance recipients' side. The only other thing I would like to add is that our employment staff attempt to take advantage of labour market opportunities in whatever area they are based and working with individuals to ensure that they can find things in their community, as much as possible, and don't have to relocate to other areas of the province or travel long distances. So it is true that in some parts of the province, this may not apply to the same extent that it does in others but there may be other opportunities in those communities that might be offered instead of something like the Harvest Connection project.

MR. ZINCK: I guess my final point will be that the farmers themselves would like to see a program like this work to its full capability as well. I mean, these are the people who always find themselves in need, as well, at harvest time. It will be interesting to see those numbers. Thank you.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Just to add to that point, that was the reason for Recommendation No. 6, yes. We felt if the client had the choice of where they wanted to work, there would be better accessibility right across the province. So it is confusing, I think, for a lot of them to have the skills needed or the place designated by the department and it denies a lot of people the ability to buy Christmas presents or get their child ready to go back to school. They can't do that when they're working for 30 cent dollars. So I'll just mention that because that was part of the motivation for Recommendation No. 6.

A short snapper from Gordie.

MR. GOSSE: Thank you. I talked about caseloads for MLAs earlier and now I would like to talk about caseloads for the social workers within the department, and realize how stressful it is for caseworkers who actually provide this. So my last question would be, the policy in the Cape Breton Regional Municipality Department of Community Services is that they have one caseworker assigned to deal with single people on community assistance. I wonder why that policy is in effect in the Sydney office of the Department of Community Services and nowhere else in the Province of Nova Scotia.

MS. RATHBUN: I'm not familiar with that example specifically but it isn't so much a policy as it would be an implementation of program delivery. Each area, like the urban areas like HRM, it may be they usually do a rotational basis so when a new person comes in, they get assigned to whoever is next on the roster. In a rural region, it probably makes more sense to do it by geographic area, so if you have someone going

in a specific direction, they are seeing that there are efficiencies there and they get to know their worker.

Some areas will assign a specific worker to youth or maybe with a single population, for the purpose of gaining some expertise in that area and have knowledge on what some of the resources are. So that is some of the rationale behind why those decisions would be made.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Okay, thanks very much. Just before we give you an opportunity to make some closing comments, I just want to clarify the intent of Recommendation No. 7. It was to allow the intake workers, or the caseworkers, to actually provide some one-time only, or short-term assistance to people to prevent them from having to go on social assistance.

We heard examples of families who actually had job offers but they had no way of getting their family or their furniture to the new location, so a small amount of money would have enabled them to actually take up that opportunity. Instead, they are forced to go on social assistance in the original community. So, just some flexibility there and some common sense to allow people, for the short term, to have the financial assistance they need so they can continue to stay independent and not go on social assistance.

It was that kind of flexibility, using the good judgment of our frontline workers, to help people out in certain circumstances.

MS. RATHBUN: Could I just respond to that shortly? I appreciate that clarification, that will be helpful to us. We are looking at what other jurisdictions are doing and that will be helpful in looking at how they address that particular gap as well. Thank you.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Another example was a young person who was two months away from graduation, a single mom, and got into financial difficulties and the advice from the department officials was to quit school, get on social assistance, and then go back and take the program all over again. Now that's a waste of public money, so just the ability to respond in a common sense fashion to some of those unique and unusual circumstances. That was partly the point of Recommendation No. 7.

Just before I pass it back to the deputy, I want to recognize that we have also been joined by observers. Elizabeth Brown is here is from The Face of Poverty - welcome, Elizabeth. Also, we have two representatives of some of the Capital District Community Health Boards - Monique Mullins-Roberts and Anna Jacobs. So thank you both for coming.

So deputy, would you like to make a couple of closing remarks? Then I want to remind the committee that we have two very short business items to do, one of them

involving the deputy - if you don't mind just staying, in terms of your schedule - and it should take us only two minutes, so thank you.

MS. TYSON: Thank you, Madam Chairman. This is obviously a very difficult, very challenging area for everyone - for MLAs who see people every day, for our staff who see people every day and for the rest of us who don't get as involved directly, but we're working with these issues on a daily basis.

We work with other provinces and territories. Janet and Mike both attend meetings once or twice a year with their counterparts across the country to try to figure out best practices, what everybody else is doing. I attend FPT meetings - Federal-Provincial Territorial meetings - where we try to work together to the extent that we can. The National Child Benefit came out of that work a number of years ago.

We try to do as much as we can for as many people as we can. Are we doing everything? No, but I think we are making progress. Over the past few years, we have been able to take some positive steps in the right direction. So, although there is always more we can do, I think the things that we are doing are moving us in the right direction and they are positive changes.

[11:00 a.m.]

Picking up on Mr. Colwell's comment about employment supports, I think we need to look at these supports as an investment in people. It is an investment in individuals, as opposed to a handout. We are trying to do more of that and look at it in that way and we'll take your suggestions in terms of trying to look into that a little more deeply because it may help us make the case a little more strongly.

Mr. Zinck made a suggestion and was wondering about the navigation of our various programs and policies. We do some of that now, but I made a note of that. We'll look into that a little further to see if there is anything more we can do along those lines. Just in conclusion, we think we're going in the right direction. We think we're doing positive things. Today, certainly, has indicated that there's much more to be done, and we'll keep working on it to the extent that we can.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Thank you very much. We appreciate all of you coming today. Deputy minister, I just wanted to bring to your attention - our next meeting had originally been scheduled for November 23rd, the Canada-Nova Scotia Affordable Housing Agreement. I just need to find out from the committee members, was it your intent to have the deputy minister there or senior officials, to discuss that issue?

MR. GLAVINE: I'm pretty sure that - of course, the deputy is overseeing this department, so having her expertise in on this would be valuable.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Now, there may be a conflict with your schedule, I understand. Could we get agreement that if there is, and you want the deputy to come, that perhaps we could meet the next Thursday?

Okay. That would be November 30th.

MS. TYSON: I'll have my office check with you, and we'll make sure. If there's anything I can move to be able, I certainly will.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Thank you, we appreciate that very much. Just quickly, does anyone want to report back on the committee vice-chairman? I understand there has been some discussion between meetings.

MR. COLWELL: Yes, I'd like to make a motion that Stephen McNeil be vice-chairman.

MR. GOSSE: I'll second that motion.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Are there any other nominations?

MR. CHISHOLM: Madam Chairman, if I could, the issue arose last time, that there was some type of an agreement between the House Leaders as to the makeup of the chairmen, as well as the vice-chairmen, for these committees. It was our understanding that we would at least get one of the committees that we could have at least a vice-chairman. I don't know. I haven't heard anything back from my House Leader on that.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Well, we did check with our House Leader.

MR. GOSSE: This wasn't one of the committees that were to be given to the governing Party for vice-chairman. This was not one of the committees. (Interruptions)

MR. CHISHOLM: That wasn't my understanding.

MR. GOSSE : I spoke to our House Leader.

MR. CHISHOLM: I'd like to put the name of Pat Dunn forward as vice-chairman, as well.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Well, since we have the confusing messages, I wonder if we need to get some clarity on this rather than going to a vote.

MR. COLWELL: It was my understanding, too, that this had been resolved.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Yes, that's our understanding as well.

MR. CHISHOLM: Well, we didn't get that message.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Does anyone have a problem with delaying this another month?

MR. COLWELL: I think we do. I think we should move on this now, and get it resolved and over with.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Do you want to do it by secret ballot or a show of hands?

Okay. Are there any further nominations? So we have the names of Pat Dunn and Stephen McNeil.

Would all those in favour of Pat Dunn as vice-chairman, could you raise your hand, please?

Would all those in favour of Stephen McNeil as vice-chairman, could you raise your hand, please?

I declare that Stephen McNeil will be the vice-chairman of the Standing Committee on Community Services.

MS. TYSON: We have the handouts for people who would like to have them, on the program.

[The committee adjourned at 11:05 a.m.]