

HANSARD

NOVA SCOTIA HOUSE OF ASSEMBLY

COMMITTEE

ON

COMMUNITY SERVICES

Thursday, February 15, 2007

Red Room

Forum on Poverty II - Round Table Discussion/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. Ronald Chisholm was replaced by Mr. Keith Bain.]

In Attendance:
Ms. Mora Stevens
Legislative Committee Clerk

WITNESSES

Women's Centres CONNECT!

Ms. Lucille Harper, Antigonish Women's Resource Centre

Ms. Della Longmire, The Women's Place, Bridgetown

Community Action on Homelessness

Ms. Darcy Harvey, Capacity Development Officer

Public Good Society of Dartmouth

Mr. Gary Healey, Program Coordinator

Face of Poverty

Ms. Elizabeth Brown, Co-Chair

Ms. Carolyn Earle, Co-Chair

HALIFAX, THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 15, 2007

COMMUNITY SERVICES FORUM ON POVERTY

1:30 P.M.

CHAIRMAN

Ms. Marilyn More

MADAM CHAIRMAN: I want to welcome everyone back for the round table part of our second Forum on Poverty. Thank you very much for coming and I want to welcome Minister Goucher, thank you.

I think perhaps first of all we'll go around the table and reintroduce ourselves. Then we'll talk a little bit perhaps about the structure of this afternoon's discussion. Carolyn, would you like to start with introductions.

[The members and witnesses introduced themselves.]

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Now I'm just going to remind everyone again to keep the microphone fairly close to your mouth when you're speaking so that every pearl of wisdom that comes from your mouth will be recorded carefully.

I'd like to make a suggestion. This is our chance to sort of review some of the information that we heard this morning, sort of compare between what we heard at this forum and the previous forum, do a little bit of analysis, talk about some priorities, talk about timing of recommendations. So I'd like to suggest that rather than jump in with motions from the beginning, what would you think about possibly taking an hour for sort of a full discussion before we start to focus in on particular directions or priorities - or does someone else have another suggestion as to how you might like to operate this afternoon?

MS. LUCILLE HARPER: Can I suggest that if we are going to do that, that we identify two or three key priority areas and then really focus the discussion on that?

MADAM CHAIRMAN: That certainly would work. So we might like to identify some of the priorities that we've discussed or heard about. Would people like to do that and then focus our initial discussion on those three? That doesn't mean we can't add other motions or recommendations towards the end of the round table. So would you like to identify, let's say three topic areas and start the discussion there? Any suggestions for the priority areas you'd like to talk about first? (Interruption)

Yes, believe me, I could talk the rest of the afternoon and give you all my ideas and priorities and recommendations but I'm not sure that would be very collaborative. The other option, too, you know we could look at some of the priorities that were identified last year because there hasn't been a lot of action taken on those and we could review and see if there's a couple there that we'd like to put forward to today's discussion.

MS. HARPER: I'd just like to speak on behalf of having some discussion, a bit more discussion, around the importance of developing a comprehensive poverty reduction strategy because I think that if we were to do that and if we were to talk about - and I know there's going to be a lot more input coming into that from community organizations after March 8th and 9th. However, if we were to spend some of this time talking about the importance of that, the benefits of that, the process that might be used to develop that, how community organizations might be engaged within that, I think a lot of the recommendations, the particular recommendations that are specific to telephones, et cetera, really fall under that broader topic.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: I think that's an excellent suggestion, Lucille, because that's sort of the umbrella recommendation that will probably come out of here. So, do we have agreement that perhaps we'll talk about the advisability of having a comprehensive poverty reduction strategy for Nova Scotia?

MR. STEPHEN MCNEIL: There is presently a bill in front of the House, which I had the honour of presenting, which laid out a framework to deal with poverty reduction strategy. I don't know if members of the House have had a chance to look at it, and I know it was sent out to some other organizations. It was an outreach type of bill where we were - not only members of the House, but we were reaching out to the organizations that were on the ground, dealing with this issue on a first-hand basis. I'm not sure what we would do differently than that. I think the most important thing is what the bill said, to reach out to the organizations that were actually dealing with this on a day-to-day basis to find solutions to provide government with the important options that they need.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: I don't remember the details - I remember debating the bill. I'm wondering, it strikes me - I think I remember. It was sort of - it would be

a government-led initiative consulting with the stakeholders, but it seems to me it wasn't necessarily an all-Party initiative, was it?

MR. MCNEIL: I believe there was room for an all-Party but if you looked at the people who were requested to be on the committee, it wasn't politicians.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: No, no.

MR. MCNEIL: It was individual people who were dealing with the issue on a day-to-day basis, people who were dealing with the results of poverty, to bring recommendations to us, and there was a time frame in it, as well as a commitment by government to bring back recommendations to the House.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Well let's have a general discussion on that approach. Any comments? Any ideas? Would that approach work? Darcy.

MS. DARCY HARVEY: I think one key, important piece of information and looking at the other governments that have implemented this, like Ireland, Newfoundland and Labrador, Quebec. Obviously there had been a groundswell of support and advocacy that went into this as well from the community, but it was really a Cabinet and government-led recognition that that's what was needed and I think all three levels of government need to be involved, as well as community, because it's not just some of the things required in a poverty reduction strategy. Some of those elements, they're going to require action from the federal government as well. They're going to require some things from municipal as well and it needs to be comprehensive and it needs to have full co-operation as well.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: So it was a government-led and directed process but it did allow for consultation and involvement of everyone else.

MS. HARVEY: I think that's really key, what Stephen's bill said. That bill was passed around the community certainly and it was great to see the involvement the community incorporated into that and incorporated into the development of the strategy as a whole. So hopefully our sessions on March 8th and 9th will come up with what the community can bring to the table.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Exactly.

MS. HARPER: I think what's really necessary for that, and this is something that came out of a recommendation that was done at one of our Moving Forward forums that we did on social assistance reform, where we asked the Department of Community Services to develop a working committee with women's organizations and with anti-poverty organizations, to begin to address some of the many issues that have been raised around ESIA programs, as well as around the working poor and the broader issue of poverty.

What we were told - not directly in these words but essentially - that there will not be a committee struck where community will be at the table with any authority whatsoever, that the role of the community will be limited to consultation only. What I would like to see go forward when we're talking about recommending a poverty reduction strategy is that we bring community to the table to participate, in a real way, in some of the decision-making that goes on because what happens too often is that community is brought together, there are some great ideas that come out and it almost feels like there's a mining of community ideas. So community comes, puts out the ideas and then that is selected at the will or the behest of the political agenda of the day, without seriously addressing the issues that the community is bringing forward.

So then to come back and say well, see, we did this and this and this which I think - as Elizabeth pointed out - is tinkering rather than actual change, what I would like to see us do because this is such a serious issue, because we've spent so much time on it, everybody around this table, because it has such significant impact for the well-being of our province, that we work at this really seriously. We do this by putting in place a working committee that includes community at those - I want to say decision-making levels, but at that level where we really are helping to sculpt the policy program thinking that goes behind it, as opposed to having our ideas cherry-picked in a way that doesn't make a significant difference.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: So I think what you're suggesting then, Lucille, is that the community organizations and other representatives be part of the body that provides the framework for the strategy, not just the occasional idea that might be picked up and included. So they actually provide that direction and momentum.

[2:00 p.m.]

Well, there certainly would be more buy-in, I would suggest, from any level of government and community that actually could help frame a strategy in that way. I go back - I was involved in some early discussions at the federal level on the Canada Volunteerism Initiative and I remember making the observation in Ottawa - there must have been 200 or 300 people there - that I didn't see any provincial representation, it was mostly federal and national volunteer organizations and some regionally-based ones. They said oh, we'll bring the provinces in later.

I think that was the big weakness of CVI, that the provinces never really felt any ownership with that whole initiative. I think if you want to include someone, they have to be there from the beginning, otherwise, they don't have as much commitment to moving the ideas forward.

I'm not sure - I don't remember all the details of your bill, Stephen. How does that relate to some of the things that Lucille has been talking about, giving the community organizations and representatives a very active role in helping to form that strategy? Were they more involved providing information?

MR. MCNEIL: No, the role was that they were part of the committee and the committee was a striking committee. They were going around the province looking for consultation, not just people who were sitting on the committee but reaching out to other organizations and they would be giving recommendations to the minister that he or she would have to report to the House by no specific timelines in May and then be acted upon. It was a community-driven process.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: And they'd have two opportunities, then. They'd be both consulted but they'd also be on the committee itself.

MR. MCNEIL: Correct, yes, the committee would be made up of - and it listed all the organizations. I can actually get you a copy of the bill.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Right. That would be useful, if we could, yes.

MS. HARVEY: You said that would be reported to the minister? Are you thinking the Minister of Community Services? I'm just thinking in terms of a poverty reduction strategy, we really see it as more not necessarily owned by or directed towards one department or another because I think for a true strategy to come into place it requires more than just changes to one department, it requires changes amongst all departments and very comprehensive in terms of Labour and Health . . .

MR. MCNEIL: If I may - the committee was made up of Community Services, Education, Finance, Health, Justice, the Advisory Council on the Status of Women, the Senior Citizens' Secretariat, the Community Health Boards, Affordable Energy Coalition, the Black Community Advocates Association and it lists a whole number of people. My view, and that could be up to the committee, but my view would be that there needs to be a lead ministry. Someone needs to be the person you have to report to, which I would think, the logical place would be the Minister of Community Services, who would be the lead minister.

By all means, the issue of poverty brings in all the ministries but somebody has to take the lead on it and be reported to. If the committee believes that that should be the Minister of Health or the Minister of Justice, then I'm open to making changes or open to looking at that. When you look at the end result of poverty, it's ending up in front of the Minister of Community Services in one form or another, when it comes to the money part of this. Justice is dealing with it, Health is dealing with it but they were all part of this committee as well - somebody from those departments. I just thought that the Minister of Community Services would be the reporting minister kind of thing.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Do you want to further comment on that, Darcy?

MS. HARVEY: Yes, I just think that in terms of a true poverty reduction strategy, I think it's more - it comes down to really in terms of in the budgetary process,

organizing the funding to all departments around the reduction of poverty and it affects all departments in that way.

I think with the implementation of a strategy, the load may be reduced off the Department of Community Services and I think the organization of all budgets have to be incorporated into the strategy and not just through one department because it is recognizing as well, though - although the Department of Community Services sees most of the impact on their budget of poverty - it's really impacting the province as a whole. It's impacting health because people in poverty are accessing health services more, they're in crisis more, they're accessing mental health services more, all those cost increases. Justice - the majority of issues around the criminal justice system are people who have lived in poverty, have come from that background, have been in severe circumstances of crisis and it is a spiral effect and it's a cycle.

So I think really from what the community perspective is that we really have to get away from the onus on one department and on the Department of Community Services and onto Cabinet, in terms of formulating its structure around the reduction of poverty because that's where the community sees that the extent of the issue has gotten right now.

MR. MCNEIL: I think, and I agree with everything you've said, and that was our submission even in the debate when we were involved in it, but I think from a purely governmental administration point, in order to get it to Cabinet, in order to - one minister, I would think, would have to be the lead at the Cabinet Table to say - you know, it will impact on all the ministries and be backed up by other ministers but I think one minister would have to take the lead to say, here's the poverty reduction strategy, here's the impact on my department and on the Department of Justice, on Education, or whoever it is, on the other departments. It needs Cabinet buy-in, but it would need to be brought forward by one minister.

Having never sat around the Cabinet Table, I assume that one minister would have to bring it forward and maybe the Minister of Tourism could elaborate.

HON. LEONARD GOUCHER: Well, somewhat. I can tell you that that happens now. I guess to give you an example, I have a minister's task force on tourism. It involves ten departments because tourism we consider to be everybody's business. I guess on poverty you could say the same thing. That's happening now.

Your scope seems to be provincial. It's not only provincial, you have to go to the next level, too, and the Department of Community Services right now and the minister is not only working with inter-departmental, she is also working and reaching out to the federal government as well, so I think that's important to realize. I understand everything you're saying but it goes well beyond here - it goes to the next level as well. I do believe our Minister of Community Services is doing that now, along with the department. This is not something they're sitting on. I can tell you sitting around the

Cabinet Table, when we talk about children's Pharmacare and things like that - some of the good things that are happening.

I'm going to be honest with you. I've got a grandson who benefits from that because his mom is in school and has no income and she does benefit from that. So we are, I think, as a government - and I say government as a whole - everybody who is sitting, every MLA, every side of the Chamber, it's very real to us. It's very important to us. We all want to try to - we genuinely all want to try to do things right.

It's not something that's going to happen overnight and I think you know that, you've been working on it a long time, as well as everybody around the table here. It's something we are all working toward and I think our Minister of Community Services is doing that and she has been taking the lead on it from our perspective, but not only provincially, federally. I can tell you that without any question at all. I'll leave it at that anyway, I'm sorry.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: I just want to pick up on Darcy's point. If it turns out that this initiative needs a lead minister, perhaps we could break out of the traditional way of thinking about poverty by making the Minister of Finance the lead minister because if anything is going to positively impact on the decreased need for support services and health care services and whatnot, it is going to be providing a livable wage for Nova Scotians because it is the biggest factor in people's health status.

I think the fear in the community and among the organizations and individuals who have been working on these issues for many, many years is, let's break that traditional mold of thinking about it as people living in poverty are over there and it doesn't have any impact on the rest of us. So we need to be sort of unique in the approach, I think, that we form to handle or develop a provincial strategy so perhaps choosing a non-traditional minister - like the Minister of Finance, where actually the biggest impact of doing this might fall - would prove to everyone that we're really serious about this and we understand the broad financial implications. Both the short-term up-front money, but also the long-term savings and improved quality of life.

So perhaps it's just a matter of looking at another department, rather than putting it necessarily back onto Community Services.

MR. MCNEIL: I think we've spent a lot of time discussing a very - from my perspective and the intent of the bill, and it didn't actually specify in the bill, it doesn't matter to me. It could be the Minister of Finance, as long as there's a minister. The issue is trying to address the issue of poverty, putting together a meaningful committee with all the departments being represented, the community groups being represented, putting recommendations and ideas in front of - it could be the Minister of Tourism, Culture and Heritage, if we wanted to bring in Cabinet, that's not the important issue. The important issue to me is that we put recommendations that government can move forward to address the issue of poverty and building a strategy around it.

So I just think whatever the ministry is, whatever the . . .

MADAM CHAIRMAN: To be fair, though, Stephen, I do disagree because I think how you do something is as important as what you do. I think the weakness and failure in a lot of the task forces and committee reports that we've had in previous years is that they've never gone anywhere, so I think if we spend time and attention to carefully think out who is involved, how it is going to be done, who it reports to, it may provide a fresh perspective and open up opportunities for action that we haven't had in the past.

I'm pleased that it's not critical to your bill actually where it goes through but I think spending a little time talking about process might not hurt. Certainly we can move on to the content, if you want. Elizabeth, I think you were next, yes.

MS. ELIZABETH BROWN: I'm agreeing. Okay, one, it is essential that we remember that we go to the federal, we have that other network, because so much of this is based on federal decisions and actions and all that sort of thing.

I see us beginning a process and I'm not just sure whether I'm ready to say which minister it should be, but I would hold that for later because it seems to me as we're having a discussion, there's the evolving of strategy and what's essential is that we use good development techniques, which is have the community involved from the very beginning. Otherwise, it is like going somewhere and saying, here's the answer, whereas what you're doing is waiting to see what the people want. If it is the teachers union of so and so in Tanzania, you listen to them first.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Okay, thank you. Lucille.

MS. HARPER: I would like to echo the importance of looking at what's happening federally because even when we look at the Newfoundland and Labrador strategy that was developed at a time with a different federal government, and when we look at that strategy, many of the solutions or many of the programs that they are looking towards for affordable housing, et cetera, are actually federal programs, some of which have been cut. So the very change at the federal level and the direction of the current federal government is going to make it more difficult for Newfoundland and Labrador to move forward on their strategy, as it's written right now.

I think absolutely we need to be looking at the federal government. I think we need to be doing that together, in order that we develop a strategy that we can actually move forward with in Nova Scotia, so I want to echo that. I also want to say that it's very important which ministry brings this forward and there is a lot of bias in this province against social assistance and people on social assistance and people who are living in poverty and that translates towards a dismissal of the Department of Community Services as a serious department in taking forward some initiatives. So it's easier not to get widespread community support for some of those initiatives.

When you put it through a ministry, such as the Department of Finance, or one of the hard ministries, it is looked at in a bit of a different way. So in some ways, I think it is very important that it is multi-departmental, that it's at two different levels, and I think part of the strategy needs to look really clearly at some of those larger issues like a Canada Social Transfer and what role does that play.

So what do we need to be doing as a province, at the federal level, and what do we need to be doing at those federal-provincial-territorial tables? I think one of the things that we're trying to do ourselves is to educate ourselves around some very complex issues like social transfers, like equalization, to get some kind of understanding about how that does impact on our ability in Nova Scotia to do what we want to be able to do and it's complex. A lot of those decisions get made at tables where there is no public scrutiny, and not even any transparency necessarily. So I'd like to see us at least be very cognizant of where some of these decisions are happening and strategic about the role Nova Scotia needs to play, both at those tables and then how we do this here in the province.

[2:15 p.m.]

MR. PATRICK DUNN: Just a comment on some of the things I've been hearing. Again, I think it is perhaps an expectation that a committee of this nature would report back to the Minister of Community Services. Again, that is just an opinion.

At that particular time, the multi-departmental stakeholders would occur at that time through the guidance of this Minister of Community Services through his or her guidance. To me that just seems to be perhaps a way that something like this should happen, as opposed to any other area, that the onus be placed on this particular minister and at the Cabinet level, through the various departments and perhaps all departments. To me, the expectation would be the findings of this particular committee and so on would have to sort of zero their energy through her and from there to all the various departments.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Thank you, Pat. Len.

MR. GOUCHER: Yes, thank you. Just briefly, I guess we're here to speak our mind and you don't want me leaving here not saying what I believe. I have to disagree, I agree with Pat. I think if you start taking this to another department, say Finance - which I totally disagree with, and no disrespect but I just can't even see that one - what you're going to do is you're going to lose focus because that department, whether we like it or not, that department, along with Health, is the department that probably deals with the majority of the poverty issues.

I think you've got to stay focused. If you don't stay focused on this, then you're going to have it going all over the map. We've got to deal with the feds. I mean I brought that up before and everyone seems to agree that the federal counterparts are a

big part of this. But do you know what? So are the municipalities. I was there for 14 years on that side of it and although they're junior partners, do you know what? They are still part of the puzzle here. Our municipal governments are very, very important.

So I guess I see - you know, we start talking about taking it to another department, taking it to Finance, taking it to Tourism. If you ever gave it to me, with all due respect, my focus as minister is not on - you know no disrespect but my primary focus is not poverty. It's just the opposite, it's trying to - although that's part of the solution, too. You've got to keep it, I believe, in a department - I don't care, Health, Community Services, somebody who deals with the issue.

I'm being very honest here - I'm not immune to this. Probably many of us around the table here aren't. We all know people who are in very difficult situations and mine are a little closer to me. I genuinely believe - as a minister and speaking as an individual as well - that if you get this in the wrong department, if you start losing the focus on it, then you're going to start sliding. You're not going to achieve what you want to achieve and again, I think you maintain it within the department, you maintain that focus. That is the lead agency and they maintain the communications and that's where you feed everything. My comments, thank you.

MS. HARVEY: I was wondering how that would work, just if it's all funnelled through the Department of Community Services? However there's this committee set up, but the findings show that to really affect poverty in this province changes have to go beyond the Department of Community Services. How does that minister, then . . .

MR. GOUCHER: If I may, Madam Chairman, and that's a good question but there's already inter-departmental committees in place to deal with it, across departmental.

MS. HARVEY: To deal with poverty?

MR. GOUCHER: Yes, I mean within the government right now. When the Minister of Community Services is trying to deal with these issues, she doesn't try and deal with it by herself, her staff doesn't deal it just within their own department - they all communicate.

Again, I can only equate my department, where we actually have interdepartmental committees. I'll just give you an example, which is the heritage strategy. We have interdepartmental, we meet with the deputies. Another one, there's the tourism strategy, there's a lot of different things but they're all interdepartmental, so we're not just talking to ourselves, we're talking to a lot of people, and I think that's important to understand.

It's the same in the House. There's 52 people in that House but we're all talking to each other and we know what is important and what isn't important and we try to

work together for the most part. Sometimes we're not too successful at it but we do. I just think that's important to understand, that's all.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Well perhaps we'll move on from this but I just want to add two more cents; I think the reason I'm talking about the Department of Finance is because immediately you talk about Community Services, I think you set a limit on our vision about poverty reduction strategies and what it can do and how it can be done. If you want to be very innovative and not have those limits, you've got to recognize that the biggest investment that could be made for the economic vitality of a province, to improve the health status, to improve education levels - the best thing you could ever do is recognize that a poverty reduction strategy could solve the root causes of so many social issues and conditions.

If you look at it as sort of the welfare side of your thinking, you're going to be very limited in what you propose to do and I think it's going to limit the ideas and recommendations and suggestions that come from the community because they are going to be thinking in the traditional paths of discussions around these issues. But anyhow, I think enough said - I think we've all made our points on that.

MR. MCNEIL: Can I just clarify something?

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Certainly.

MR. MCNEIL: I just wanted to make sure that the minister didn't think that I wanted the Minister of Tourism to handle this. I was just using him, as a reporting minister - it doesn't matter to me. This is dealing with the Minister of Community Services' portfolio on every front and she or he - if the strategy does what I think it will do, and that will distribute or identify that the cause is across many departments, he or she will be fighting pretty hard at the Cabinet Table to make sure that the other departments are coming forward with some money because it'll end up improving his or her ability to do the job, that is being Minister of Community Services.

We've been discussing a reporting minister, really, but anyway I just wanted to make sure that . . .

MADAM CHAIRMAN: I always use the analogy if there were a huge asteroid coming towards Earth and everybody just set aside all their concerns about the petty things and focused on this particular crisis, I think we need almost that attitude in Canada to deal with the poverty crisis. It has to be a shared responsibility and a shared involvement. I guess we want to break that traditional way of looking at poverty as just affecting a few people, off to the side and wouldn't it be nice if we could do something. Poverty impacts on all of us, every single day, whether we think it does or not. So we need a non-traditional way of looking at it.

Anyhow, let's move on to the content. Yes, Leo.

MR. GLAVINE: I still think we have a place here for a two-stream approach whereby we work on a poverty reduction strategy, which we all know is not going to be developed in a month or two months. The program and the strategy that is currently in Newfoundland and Labrador was really a year or two years of work before it was put forward as the kind of pieces that they wanted to move forward with and especially how they wanted it to impact rural Newfoundland.

I think what happened last year with the Poverty Forum was a real change of direction. I had been in the House for, up to that point, two and a half years and other than being critics of the government - in terms of what they were doing or not doing around Community Services - was pretty well what we were doing, outside of perhaps certainly a few strong initiatives that came out of the standing committee. So I thought last year was a real departure where we came together as an all-Party committee to move forward. I think three of those - when we look at this letter that went off to the minister with the seven recommendations, we know that two or three of those really got some good pick-up and became incorporated in a budget, in a ministerial plan.

I still think we need to take a few of those concrete steps and once again move forward while we are developing this comprehensive poverty reduction strategy. I think we need to keep both streams moving along. These seven recommendations were good. We heard certainly an area this morning, for example, that Gary brought forward and a couple of the other presenters, and I think we need to move and look at one or two concrete things right now. Some may be, in fact, right here in these seven recommendations and it could be one or two others outside, but that would be my take.

When you're making progress, I still think it's only a small step and a series of small steps but it is moving in the right direction. It's like the clawback piece here around harvesting and around forestry, I mean, if we could expand that to any work that a recipient does, again up to a certain cap, up to a certain amount, but any kind of productive work, it's like Robert Borden this morning, if he's on provincial assistance, he's in the process of transitioning - hopefully, as he said - to becoming a full-time working citizen of Nova Scotia but he may get only one or two days of work during winter for a period of time. Well, let's have that go enhance his quality of life. These are the kinds of concrete things that I think we still need to do while advocating, as groups are, for this poverty reduction strategy. That's my take.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Thank you. That's a good sort of bridge into the rest of this discussion because I think there was general consensus that we might focus on two or three things in the first hour and one of them certainly has been - and I think we've had general agreement - that we need to move forward in supporting a poverty reduction strategy for the province. So I think that your suggestion is that perhaps we might even look at the clawback as another issue on a different level, obviously, but as another issue to be generally discussed around the table.

Does anyone want to talk a little bit about the clawback? We had originally suggested that wage reduction should apply only to earnings above \$3,000 per year base, and an annual review should then take place on this program. I recollect there had even been some discussion that after \$3,000, that it shouldn't necessarily be a 70 per cent clawback but I don't see it mentioned in the letter but that could be part of our discussion as well. Lucille.

MS. HARPER: Well I guess one of the things - if we want to put that on the table and I certainly think it's something that we need to address - one of the things I'd like to do is to remove some of the language that we've been using around some of these issues, such as incentive to work. I find that language difficult because I think, as we heard very clearly today here from people who are currently living in poverty, is that what they want to do is, they want to work and they want to be supporting their families - whether they're on social assistance or whether they're working poor. They don't need incentives to work. What they need is the barriers to be removed and the supports to be put in place.

Then I say again, I want to come back to two things, one is transportation. If we don't have transportation and we don't have child care, it almost doesn't matter what we do, it's going to be extremely difficult for people in rural communities to get to work.

Now, having said that, with respect to the clawback, why are we clawing back one single cent of anything until somebody is reaching whatever we see as the low income cutoff or the poverty line or the market basket measure. However we decide what that is, I don't think we should be clawing back one single cent.

[2:30 p.m.]

One of the recommendations that the women's centres made to the Department of Community Services - and it was a recommendation that was well supported by organizations around the province - was that what we do around that clawback is, first of all, we don't claw back until people are reaching whatever we determine that poverty line to be. I would like to say that we at least go \$1,000 or \$1,500 above the poverty line, but in any case, that should be what we're looking at.

That has got huge benefits. The other thing is that we don't touch one single cent of somebody's money until they've had a solid year of employment because what we know is that once someone has had a solid, continuous year of employment, many things happen. They've got a significant amount of experience and credibility, their resume becomes much more solid when they're going forward, they're more skilled, they're more likely to advance in their own workplace, which means that their income is going to increase as it goes. What we've done right then and there is, we have really enabled someone to stay in the workplace for a solid year. That's a huge advantage to the province. Cutting that funding back to a level that keeps them below the poverty

line while they're struggling to get ahead, to me just doesn't make sense, so I'd like to see that recommendation go forward so that we determine what that line is going to be. I hope we look at rural communities and take transportation into account when we are determining that and we don't cut anything back until someone has been above that line for a solid year, nor do we close their file.

So when someone is on income assistance and they go out and they get a job that removes them from income assistance, their file gets closed. Then starting that file open again - if they are laid off or if they can't sustain, stay in the workplace for whatever reasons, because of all of the other barriers that are there as we said around single parent, child care, transportation and others, then they have to go through that whole process again, which sets them back even further.

So keep the file open, let them earn enough money so that they're above the low income cutoff for a year, and then let's look at it. That, to me, feels to be really minimal and really the most humane way we can approach this.

MR. GARY HEALEY: Let me speak to that on two particular points. The clawback, I agree, there shouldn't be a clawback. Second to that, in the department's response to that recommendation, they are giving back 30 per cent of income tax refunds? Giving back? Why did they have it to begin with? They didn't earn that, the recipient earned that. Why was that touched? Why is it still being touched?

Here's a personal example of this, the year - I would love that, that would be phenomenal, I would still be entitled to assistance because I haven't yet reached the LICO after a full year of work. I have come back into a labour force with 20-plus years of experience and I have had to start all over again.

My second pay cheque - second pay cheque - they changed my qualification status with Community Services. Because I was now able to work, my entitlement went from \$575 per month to \$400-plus. So I would have effectively been entitled to \$9.98. Transportation disappeared, Pharmacare, we're not even going there - \$5 co-pay, my drugs aren't even covered on the provincial plan. I have to buy my own drugs anyway.

So the reality is, yes, I agree wholeheartedly and the year is a minimum, an absolute minimum. If you're talking about a single parent, two years, a minimum of two years for a single parent.

The second part of this, and I don't mean this to be offensive to anybody in this room but who has a farm in their backyard in HRM? I don't remember seeing any, I don't have a tree stand in my backyard. If I want to take advantage of the \$3,000 a year harvesting incentive initiative, I have to go where that is, which means I have to move there, take part in that process to earn that money to keep.

If I'm on assistance, I can't move anywhere and if I don't have that available to me, that is useless. That's of no benefit to me at all. I know we're looking province-wide and I understand that but right now, in HRM, and probably in Cape Breton Regional Municipality, it would be the same issue, that would be a non-starter. So a pretty knee-jerk defence reaction on that response, as far as I am concerned. Again clawback, no, I agree with the minimum one year at that income level of whatever is determined to be the median income, either the basket rate or LICO, one year at that standard and then a declining clawback for the next six months until the person gets down to zero eligibility. Thank you.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Thank you. Anyone else like to comment on the clawback, et cetera? Yes, Leo.

MR. GLAVINE: Just perhaps a little bit of a linkage here. You know there are people who are on provincial assistance who are there as part of a very strong stereotyping in Nova Scotia and probably in all of our provinces. I think we also have to be, before we make real, significant improvements in the lives of these people and therefore the real, significant improvement is getting them off that system as we know, but I think it is to give more of those profiles. You know it is like meeting Gary today, I mean would I expect Gary to be, a provincial assistance recipient? I mean here he is - a bright, thoughtful person, wanting to contribute in Nova Scotia and there are many, because of whatever kind of physical or mental illness or life trauma that takes them into the system.

Also, people there with poor education who just are not making it in the workforce today - they need a comprehensive and holistic approach to be met by the caseworker, that they are just not there with a prescription from the policy manual but they're looking at helping them now but looking at them long-term. There are a lot of 20-year olds and 30-year olds who could be back as more productive citizens. They should be all valued but they could be more productive for Nova Scotia.

I think this piece around the clawback has been one of the great deterrents to people. I have had many who have said, it is tough working, going down to TRA and loading a truck at 2:00 a.m., between 2:00 a.m. and 6:00 a.m., and I can only keep \$30 of that \$100. I mean how disheartening is that kind of approach?

I think there can be a real, genuine difference made here if we look at this piece because I have, in each of my years in office now, I just simply said, look, I'm going to take a real interest in you and I'm going to work with you for the next couple of months.

I've had seven or eight people who have moved off provincial assistance by getting them into a work activity centre, by actually calling an employer and asking them, would you give this guy a chance for three months and see how he performs? There is still no greater pick-up, I think, to improving one's life than to do something

productive every day. When you get out of that mode for several months and years because you're discouraged by the system that's trying to help you, you just don't go forward.

I still think and I brought this up as number one today, because I do know of a few people who went out and earned the \$3,000 in agriculture in the Valley last year. It got them thinking about, geez, during those three months I earned that kind of money, my life was so much better than living on \$4,000 or \$5,000 a year. Now they want to work and they're looking at ways in which they can get back to work full time.

So I think it can be an important measure, with good counselling, to get people to look at this. I think expanding this, it's not a costly endeavour for the Nova Scotia government, for the taxpayer of this province. It's a great benefit if we start to move stronger in this direction. It's very sad, it's very limited now, but there can be piecemeal work here in the city as well that can be an avenue to getting back to work. Just something I've observed.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Thank you, Leo. Does anyone else want to comment on this one? Does anyone want to introduce a third topic? Yes, Carolyn.

MS. EARLE: I just wanted to say when we had a discussion about the clawback in our committee meetings, we looked at it as a 70 per cent tax on people and nobody in Canada pays 70 per cent tax, so it's really a very unjust system, and figure.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: A good point.

MS. BROWN: One other thing that we ended up with, Marilyn, at the end of the session this morning - there was quite a bit of discussion about the humanity of meeting people at the door and in a way, Leo has mentioned this. So whether this is through the re-education of the people on the ground, you take 15 minutes and you say, come in and have a cup of coffee, how are you? Then there may be some book work you have to do but first of all, treat them as a human being.

That's part of this re-education and giving people the confidence to say that's okay. Now it's a very little thing, but you may form a little possibility for mentoring, where you just have the phone calls, and the people have a feeling that there is somebody in the system who knows who they are, and not just case number 39025-4.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: So that whole issue of dignity and that they are fellow citizens, not . . .

MS. BROWN: That whole issue, absolutely.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Yes, okay.

MS. BROWN: And it comes into education of people.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Thank you, Elizabeth.

MS. HARPER: Two things I just wanted to put out to this and perhaps it's a segue and perhaps it isn't - clawback presupposes employment and in rural communities, particularly the very rural communities, we don't necessarily have employment. Again, there's no public transportation systems and I would really like to have this committee think a little bit about how we realistically address some of these issues.

The other piece is that in rural communities where there is no child care, then there's not an option to go to work necessarily and particularly if you have to travel to get there, and particularly the child care that is there is located in town centres and that's not where you happen to be working, so it gets hugely complex. So I would really like us to do a little bit of thinking around this because it significantly impacts rural communities.

[2:45 p.m.]

One of the things that I find interesting - I just happened to be in Ottawa recently, presenting to the House of Commons Standing Committee on the Status of Women Canada, and I just happened to be there at the same time that a woman from REAL Women was there presenting as well. It was interesting on a number of levels and one of the things that really struck me is the support that there is for middle class women to make the choice to stay home with their children, and generally it is the middle class women, it is not the middle class men who are choosing to do that. It is the middle class women who happen to be living in a household where one income can support the family.

There's a valour to that, there's a protection to that, there's a heroism to that, there's a wanting to create fair taxes for that, there's a whole federal so-called child care initiative to put \$1,200 a year into that. If it's a woman who is a single mother and who is living in poverty, that then becomes a whole other story and there is not support for her to stay home - there is no valour in her situation. She is not supported, she is left to live in horrendous poverty, she is left to try to raise those children, she is blamed, she is stigmatized, she is set aside.

I just want to kind of put that on the table because I really see such an incredible difference in how we look at women's roles, whether they're attached to a man or whether they're not attached to a man, it changes significantly and whether they're attached to a man who is earning enough income that they can stay home or not.

That has really struck me in all of this and when we're talking about clawbacks. We're assuming that, (a) there's work, (b) there's access to get to that work, and (c)

that that's the choice that somebody should be making when perhaps the choice they should be making is to stay home, do that fundamental, basic caregiving to their children and be well supported to do that. So I wanted to put that in.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Thank you. Della.

MS. LONGMIRE: A few years ago at the Women's Centre, we had a young woman come in who really wanted to stay home and take care of her child. She was an educated woman, a teacher who found herself, for a lot of circumstances, on social assistance. She was told that she could go back to work and her child care - this no longer applies but at that time it applied - would be paid, so she would have a subsidized seat for so long, but what she really wanted to do was stay home with her child and the mechanisms at that point were not in place for her to do that.

I want to really strengthen what Lucille has said, that one of the things - we've done such a great job in negative PR to people on social assistance, which is what you were talking about. It's just amazing to me because I have this conversation with people who I know in my community all the time and the myth around people who are on social assistance is just amazing. There aren't the opportunities, particularly in rural Nova Scotia, to do some of those things that women want to do and one of them is to stay home. Some don't, some do - it's like every other segment of the population and we need to kind of debunk some of those myths that are out there and allow people to have some choices. I just wanted to put that out there.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Yes, Gary.

MR. HEALEY: I just wanted to - I think it's relative to what Lucille just said, by the same token that that supportive, helpful environment is created when it's a middle class woman who wants to stay at home and raise her child when that falls into place, then when it's a single parent who is not afforded that opportunity - well, let's take it one step further; the single parent, the single mother most times, who is fortunate enough to be receiving support from the child's father for the child - they don't keep that money, that's another tax. That money is clawed back, my understanding is that it is dollar for dollar, so effectively the father of that child has just paid the government for his right to see his child. Does that make any sense to anybody? I don't understand that. (Interruption) It's not correct?

MR. GOUCHER: My daughter is in that situation and it is not clawed back, so maybe you should check on that. Again, she's in a different situation, but it's not clawed back.

MR. HEALEY: Well, I had three cases three months ago where it was - dollar for dollar.

MR. GOUCHER: I'm just speaking from - you know, I think it just deserves a little bit of investigation, I'll leave it at that, that's all.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: I don't know all the answers but I'm wondering if it's got something to do with whether or not the custodial parent has assigned - I think that's the term that's used - those costs to the department when they're doing up the initial budget or something. It seems to me I've run into it on both sides of that.

MR. GOUCHER: It's a real difficult situation . . .

MADAM CHAIRMAN: If you just want to talk into the mike, Len, thank you.

MR. GOUCHER: My voice is loud enough that that mike can hear me. I'm sorry, my back is a little bad here and I'm just trying to get comfortable.

It's a real difficult situation with some single moms with the dads who are in default - let's just say that I think that's a good word, default. In my particular case, my daughter has been on both sides of it and I am speaking about her and I probably shouldn't be in some ways but I don't know how else to equate this because I've been - from her perspective, there's been no clawback.

I just want to address the whole issue of stay-at-home moms because I've been in that situation, too. I worked for the airline and I was not in the middle class at that time - I was probably lower middle. We made a decision, as a family, that my wife was going to stay home and she stayed home with my children until they were 12 years old. My oldest daughter was 12 and then she decided she wanted to go back to work at that point in time, and then she went back to school. She did it because she knew she had to do it. She didn't ask anybody else to do it, she did it. I think that is really important because there's got to be some self-initiative here, too.

I understand what everybody is saying and I know everybody's circumstances are different and that's not always going to be the situation. There are a lot of people out there, I'll tell you, I give an awful lot of credit to and my wife is one of them, and some other people who I know were in similar situations where they actually took it upon themselves to make sure that they stayed home with their children. I was not making a big income in those days, I was making \$8,000 or \$9,000 a year. Now granted, it was a while back but even in those days it wasn't that much. We made a conscious decision ourselves, as a family, that she was going to stay home and we made do with what we had but we made it work. It may have meant that I was out cutting wood or I was doing something else as well, to try to bring a little bit of money in. I give my wife and a lot of other people credit because it's not always the government, it's not always somebody else who you have got to look to for that help. Maybe it's a little self-initiative, too.

As I said, it is a double-sided coin and there are two sides to it but I think that side has to be mentioned because there are a lot of great women out there, I'll tell you, who take the initiative themselves and I have the greatest respect in the world for them. Just a comment that I wanted to make.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Does anyone else want to comment on anything? Stephen.

MR. MCNEIL: Just to Leo's point around the wage reduction and the \$3,000 before any clawback. I think one of the things that we want to be mindful of today is that we can make a recommendation on the ideal, knowing full well that the government is not going to move towards it, or we can make a recommendation, hopefully, that we could pull the government to a certain stage. The Harvest Connection program wasn't exactly all that we wanted the last time. It was very narrowly focused, I think there were also some issues with how it's being implemented but I think if we say to allow a recipient to earn \$3,000 it may not be all that we want but if we just say let's open that up to everyone, as opposed to a narrow focus on the profession of the agricultural community or forestry, that may be attainable.

We may not get the ideal so I think we should keep in mind - let's look at what's attainable from government. It doesn't mean we can't talk about ideal, but if you want to move them, we had better learn to run before we enter a marathon.

MS. HARPER: I think that's a strategy and I think it's a wrong strategy. I just want to be clear that I think women need to have the choice to stay home or go to work or to go to school and they need to be supported to do that. So I hope that's what you heard me saying because that's very much what I wanted to say.

The responsibility of government is to set policy. Policy makes a statement about our values - what we value, who we value. If we say it is okay for certain members of our society to live in poverty because that's as far as we can go as a government, then what we're saying is that, that is okay. We are sanctioning that.

So I guess what I think is that we absolutely have to map out what is fair and what is just. Does that become the ideal? Perhaps that is the ideal, and that is absolutely where we have to be heading.

Now what happens along the way as we get there may be something a little bit different. There's no sense in giving somebody a half a tank of gas and telling them they've got to drive across the province, right? We see this again and again and it's one of the big problems with the income assistance program - that we tell somebody that we're going to support them, give them child care so they can go to community college five days a week and we give them child funding for three days a week. They can't do it, it doesn't make sense. It's not fair, it's not what we think.

Is it what we can do? Can we give three days a week of child care? Well, you know, then why are we asking people to do five days a week of school? So I think what we have to do - and I think this really, in creating a vision for this province, needs to be a key part of a poverty reduction strategy - we have to say fundamentally, basically, what it is that we want. Then, how do we get there in sort of fits and starts and halting measures that are perhaps inadequate?

I guess that's the way things often move forward, but unless we're saying very, very clearly that it is not acceptable to have anybody in this province living in poverty, then not only are we always going to have poverty, but we're going to be saying - I tend to think of the global "we" because as a citizen of Nova Scotia, I feel some responsibility for government, so in the Royal "we" around government - what we're saying as a province and what you're saying as a government, is that poverty is okay and I think we have to say that poverty is not okay and we are going to get rid of it, so this is what we're going to do. How we get there is a bit of a different story.

MR. MCNEIL: I appreciate everything you're saying and I'm not disputing any of that. In my privilege I've had to sit in the House, I've debated this issue at every opportunity I've had and I think I have a bill to deal with the province developing a strategy. We are now looking at providing the government with options today that we'd like to see moved forward on. We can sit here and do unrealistic things that we know are not going to happen.

[3:00 p.m.]

In my constituency where Della and I live, the average income is \$22,000. Somebody working on minimum wage does not have Pharmacare, they do not have transportation. So if I am going to ask the government to provide the people of my constituency, to move them to the poverty line in Nova Scotia, if I'm going to ask them to allow them to maintain their benefits - which I believe they should have, I'm not disputing any of that, it's real, it's part of growing your family - I want to also say to the government, that the working man and woman in my constituency should have those same benefits.

So to say to them to do that, to turn around at this particular moment in time dealing with what we have and the financial restraints of our province, they're not going to give me anything, and that's just the reality of the government. It doesn't matter whether it is a New Democratic Government, a Liberal Government or a Progressive Conservative Government - they have to deal within the envelope which is given to them.

What I'm saying from our committee's perspective is, what can we do today to make a difference in the lives of Nova Scotians when that budget rolls around in three weeks or three months or a month and a half?

I think the Harvest Connection program needs to be expanded, needs to take the barriers off of specifically saying the agricultural community. I think it should go across sectors- the tourism sector is a prime one, and there could be endless opportunities for people. I just think that's attainable, it is something that government can do today. The strategy, as we move out, can deal with the long-term goals that we're talking about and how we get there by thinking outside of the box. That's all I have.

MS. HARVEY: I don't think it's necessarily unreasonable to ask for elimination of the clawback globally. Regardless of what the work is or where you live or whatever, I think that having a program tied to a specific industry or a specific work limits people's choice in the work that they do and in a way it is sort of dictating to people where you can work because you are on income assistance. This is the job that you should be doing and because we are paying you or how you live, then we also get to dictate what work you do and the benefits you get for doing that work that we want you to do.

So I don't think it is unrealistic to ask for just elimination of the clawback in general. In reality, it is not costing the government or the department any more money to do that because with the clawback, people aren't taking advantage of work and they remain on income assistance anyway for the same amount of time, if not longer. Without a clawback, they're able to get ahead. They're able to maintain, for maybe just one year, their income assistance versus potentially the rest of their lives and their children are able to see them work themselves up, get out of that situation and maybe avoid getting in that situation themselves. So I think it is totally reasonable to ask for elimination of the clawback and it makes sense and it is not costing the government any more money, it's actually going to save them money in the long run.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Does anybody else want to comment on this, because I'm thinking it might be time to take a 10-minute break. (Interruption) Sure, Len.

MR. GOUCHER: In an ideal world, you're right, but it's not an ideal world and I have to go back to Stephen's comments. You've got an envelope that you've got to work in. There's one pot of money out there - municipally, federally, provincially. There's one taxpayer and you've got to work within that.

Right now I think the taxpayer in this province, we're paying enough - just let me finish - the problem being that it is fine to say ideally there should be no clawback but the thing is, that money could go somewhere else to help somebody else.

Then I have to ask the question, if we do increase funding in one field or another, then where does the additional money come from - health, education? I think those are real questions, and again I say in an ideal world it's a great thought. I mean it's fine to sit around the table here, and I think this is very constructive and I'll be honest with you, I'm really glad I'm here because it's great to be able to actually interact and hear the comments.

Again, I agree, I don't care what government it is, I don't care what the colour of the government is, there are some realities and there are some real hard realities when it comes to the dollars and cents of these issues. I don't know how else to put it. Stephen, I think your comments are bang on, from the standpoint that there is an envelope, there is only so much. But my question still is, if we did go to some other level of support, then where are we going to get the money from and what program are we going to take it from? Right now we have Health, Education, Community Services, taking about 72 per cent of the total budget. It is just a question, Madam Chairman, I just wanted to raise it as a question. I'm not arguing the point but it's just that there are some realities out there.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: We have three people who want to comment, so I'll go to Gary because you spoke first and then Darcy and then I'd like to add something. Then I am going to suggest that we take a 10-minute break. Then why don't we come back and practice the process that we've been talking about, in terms of the poverty reduction strategy development, in that we do have community members around the table and perhaps together, both committee and community, we can frame some of the priorities and recommendations coming out of today's forum. Gary.

MR. HEALEY: This is primarily a question, I don't even know if somebody here would be able to address it sufficiently. My question is, enabling an income assistance recipient to earn \$3,000 a year before attaching or clawing back or affecting their income assistance, where does that affect the income assistance budget? Where is the bottom line effect on that? I'm not understanding that. I don't understand where the additional dollars have to come from if the income assistance recipient has gone and found themselves work and are allowed to keep some of that earning.

We're not talking about people who make \$30,000, \$40,000 or \$50,000 a year, we're talking about the \$3,000 to \$7,000 a year - they're not even on the tax roll because they don't make enough money. That's what I'm not understanding, if they take the initiative to go and find jobs and they're allowed to keep \$3,000 of what they earn in the job they've found, how does that impact the income assistance budget? I don't get that, I'm not understanding that.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Let's assume that's a rhetorical question for now. Okay, Darcy.

MS. HARVEY: Following along Gary's train of thought - yes, I mean someone who is on income assistance - we know that the wage clawback right now isn't working for people. People are deterred from trying to get work because it's really no benefit to them, it's not going to get them off assistance because they're not able to keep enough money to get ahead, so they're staying on the system longer. So they're already receiving income assistance, people aren't taking advantage of it in the way that it was made to be because it's a policy that doesn't work.

Eliminating the clawback is going to get people off the system faster and it is not affecting the income assistance budget because these people are on income assistance already and for that year they are most likely going to stay on income assistance because they're not working, with the clawback, because they're not making enough money to get off it.

So in the business sense and in a financial sense, it is more beneficial for the government to eliminate the clawback, to enable people to work for a year before they are taken off assistance, and that is going to be much quicker than they would have been if the clawback had been in place like it is now.

I don't know - to me, it just seems to make such good sense. It is saving the government much, much money. When that person gets off the system, that money is going to be there for something else, for another program or whatever, because people, they are in the workforce, they have - as Lucille said, it just makes sense. I don't think it's going to affect the bottom line, I don't think it affects the purse strings of the government because they're paying out that money anyway.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: I just want to make a comment, too. When we're talking about eliminating the clawback or guaranteeing a living wage for all Nova Scotians, to me it just makes sense to invest in people. I mean, we don't think twice about investing in the economy or corporations or job opportunities or whatever, but it has been proven in research and the experiences of other countries that if we invest in the citizens, that's going to provide the best cost-benefit ratio of anything.

When the province - and I'm speaking as an individual here, goodness knows what my own caucus would say - but whatever Party is in government gets to spend an awful lot of money but they have to set priorities. They spend in the direction that sort of reaffirms their philosophical beliefs.

Even though we are a have-not province, we have a lot of money to spend each year or to allocate each year. We will never in Nova Scotia get a hold on the amount of money that we're pouring into health care until we raise the living wages of Nova Scotians because that has the biggest impact on poor health - not making enough money. So it just makes sense to allow people a decent living wage so that their health improves, so that we don't have to spend so much money on treating sickness and physical conditions - chronic health conditions.

Until we equate a living wage with good health, I think we've going to distort our discussion around this. We're not going to control health care costs until we look at a poverty reduction strategy and the outcomes. So we either spend the money up front and help people stay healthy and have a good quality of life, or we're going to spend even more money down the road to treat them when they get sick.

I know that's a simplistic view but, quite frankly, it's been proven over and over again in research and in other countries, so it really is as simple as that. Those are just my comments.

Let's take a 10-minute break - okay, I'm sorry, Trevor. You've been exceptionally quiet the past hour and a half, Trevor.

MR. TREVOR ZINCK: I'll just make one quick comment, it's in regard to what I said earlier in the day about when an individual actually approaches the last resort, which is the Department of Community Services. I honestly believe if we invest the time, the taxpayer will appreciate the fact that the government and the department are actually making an effort to enable that person to get off social assistance. So eventually their ability or tax dollars are actually back in their pocket in due time, and it goes along with actually working with the individual and taking them through a stage.

You have to understand that a caseworker is not a social worker but let's allow them, or let's train them to work with an individual and put them on that plan, that path which will enable them to get off it, and perhaps even in a year. And if that means allowing somebody to have an additional part of an income - and Tommy Frizzell stood here today and said, you know, I make \$5,000 a year; that's what I'm living on. Well, if he's able to find a job that allows him to make \$10,000, his life is going to be improved.

You know we're talking about budget, we talk about mental health - 4 per cent of the budget in health care is in mental health - but we have so many other issues in and around mental health that cross over so many different budgets and departments. We have to understand - and Madam Chairman, you brought up a good point, you look at our seniors. Every week I'm getting a call from Dartmouth North from a senior who can't afford to pay their rent. Their Canada Pension is \$1,100 and their rent is \$600 and by the time they pay out a little bit of money to pay someone to take them to the grocery store or to pay the co-pay on their medications, no wonder they're in the hospital.

You know, we're talking about crime and the biggest thing that I've found interesting now - we're talking about how to bring poverty to the forefront. If we look at the issue of crime and the boundaries where it's going, it's no longer in the poor communities anymore, crime is everywhere, and it starts with enabling families - and you know I've said the other night at a community meeting that I was blessed that I had two parents at home that I knew were watching out for me. Not everyone has that and when a young person - I had the Minister of Justice in Dartmouth North back in October and I took him on a little tour and he could not believe that people actually lived on Pinecrest Drive and Brule Street, in and around boarded-up buildings, eight or 10 of them, to be exact.

My point to him was, there are individuals who not only live there but there are young people who walk out those doors every day and that's their life. That is their world, that is the only thing that they see in front of them, there is no goal.

[3:15 p.m.]

We have to be, as a society, responsible for that in some way. If it means taking an individual or a young single person who is trying to raise a family who, for some reason, has found themselves reaching out for help, to go in there and actually do the work, because there are a lot of people thinking that people are milking the system - go work at McDonald's, why don't they get a part-time job at McDonald's?

Just walk into these people's homes and see how they are living and you have to be compelled to want to at least find a solution. Stephen, you know I agree and, hopefully, some day we'll form a government, as your Party hopes to and Len, yours does now, and have to actually deal with doling out those figures. But to actually admit that there's a problem is a start. I think that hopefully, we've seen it recently on the weekend with the Tory Convention and the resolutions that came out of there, but that's just one step.

MR. GOUCHER: Did you go? (Laughter)

MR. ZINCK: I heard about it. (Laughter) Anyway, thank you, let's go for a break.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: So we will reconvene back here at 3:30 p.m. Great, thank you.

[3:17 p.m. The committee recessed]

[3:31 p.m. The committee reconvened.]

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Okay, I think we'll get started. Pat had to leave to look after a small emergency and Gary had to go and pick up his daughters, so I think they've departed for the afternoon. (Interruption) Family first, exactly.

What I would like to suggest is, I think now we need to pick some priorities based on - we have three sources of information - the information we heard this morning during the presentations; the balance of recommendations left over from the standing committee's work following the first forum; and also the discussion we just had earlier this afternoon where we identified three priority areas: the comprehensive poverty reduction strategy, removing barriers and adding supports to those on social assistance who want to work or are able to work, and that issue of making sure that clients of Community Services are always served with dignity and treated as fellow citizens.

So I think we are now in a position where we can actually discuss and formulate and make decisions, recommendations to the standing committee and to government. So would someone like to start? Yes, Lucille.

MS. HARPER: Well, I'm going to try to get out of here shortly, I thought awhile ago, but anyway. We just had a bit of a caucus over the break, so we wanted to put forward three recommendations for consideration. One is increasing the minimum wage, and that can be done in steps until it reaches a livable minimum wage; eliminate the clawback, we still stand there; and extend Pharmacare to the working poor.

So if there were three things that could happen immediately, a number of us thought it would be those three things.

MR. GOUCHER: Just on the clawback, you're talking about the \$3,000?

MS. HARPER: No.

MR. GOUCHER: You're talking about total?

MS. HARPER: We're talking about no clawback until the income reaches whatever is considered to be the poverty line. I think I would really like to support that it be the market basket measure, because I think that's the only fair one for rural areas, and that that be in place until the person has a first year of continuous employment. Is that what we are looking at?

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Okay, let's deal with these one at a time. Let's take that one first, or did you have them in priority order? Okay, let's continue the discussion then. (Interruption) Yes, extend Pharmacare to the working poor.

Okay, just because we've had a little more discussion on it, let's do the second recommendation first - to eliminate the clawback for social assistance recipients until their income reaches market basket measure level.

MR. MCNEIL: Just roughly, \$20,000, \$21,000?

MS. HARPER: Yes, probably. It's a bit of a challenge, because one of the advantages of market basket measure is that it has a bit of a geographic base to it, so it changes a little bit according to - so I guess what that recommendation is, is when we're looking at any measure of poverty, please include transportation, so however that works.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: So is transportation factored into that measure?

MS. HARPER: Yes.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Okay. And you're also talking about eliminating the clawback until income reaches market basket measure and the recipient has been employed for one year. Is that what you're saying?

MS. HARPER: Yes.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Okay. So that's the recommendation.

MS. EARLE: So is that likely going to happen in one year, Lucille?

MS. HARPER: Is what likely to be able to happen?

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Working for one year - how does that get added on?

MS. EARLE: Would they be able to reach the market basket level in one year?

MS. HARPER: Well, you know I think that's an either/or, until it reaches the - it would be in place until the person is living at a level that is not poverty. I'm just saying there needs to be more discussion on how the poverty line gets established and that needs to be agreed upon. I think there are three different measures: one is the low-income cut-off, one is the market basket measure, and there's another one that I can't remember the name of it right now. So that's a discussion for whoever is going to discuss that. I'm just saying we need to include transportation. But if a person doesn't reach that level, then there shouldn't be a clawback, but their assistance is not eliminated until they reach that level and has been there for a full year.

MR. MCNEIL: Again, I'll go back to my initial comment - that I think we need to be realistic. If somebody right now is working at minimum wage, they're living below the poverty line, this is not even affecting them. The government is not going to say to somebody on social assistance - or I shouldn't say that, I would be very surprised if the government said to somebody on social assistance, we're going to guarantee you a wage of \$20,000 if you get a job, and that's in essence what we're saying in your motion. We can describe it in any other way, but that's what we're saying - the government is going to guarantee you the minimum wage or they're going to guarantee you the poverty line or the basket level, but if you're working at a job in Nova Scotia, we're not going to do that.

MS. HARPER: That's why it goes hand in hand with increasing . . .

MR. MCNEIL: I know, but it goes back to - I think what I'm saying to you, though, is, we're in a very narrow window in terms of going to the budget. If we said to the government, expand your Harvest Connection Program that is presently allowing someone to earn \$3,000 before any clawbacks, to have no limitations on it - goes across sectors, across whatever industry you're in, and then we start the clawback.

Your motion, and I believe you're talking about the clawback, I think is one that should move into our strategy around poverty, because it's bigger than just somebody on social assistance. It encompasses the working poor, it encompasses seniors, it encompasses people on pensions, and work towards that. But I think if we want government to take this and actually act on something now, I think we need to be more realistic, and that is expanding that existing Harvest Connection Program to have no limitations out beyond anyone who is looking for a job, and your motion would move into that committee on a strategy to deal with poverty.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Do we want further discussion? What did we say if someone were on social assistance, what were they going to make over a year? Is it \$9,000?

MR. ZINCK: Well, a single person, Tom Frizzell who presented earlier today was making \$5,100. (Interruption)

MS. HARVEY: . . . rarely, I've seen very, very few above \$6,000. But that's single people.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: I just want to take this committee's motion and make an example. So someone is earning \$6,000 on social assistance and they get a job. What the recommendation is suggesting is that they continue on social assistance and any additional money that they earn, the additional money is not clawed back until they reach, let's say, \$20,000 - let's assume that is the market basket measure - until they reach \$20,000. So there's no additional money for their social assistance payments because it stays steady, right? There's no increase there, it's just the clawback is not in effect. Yes, okay. Len.

MR. GOUCHER: Again, I think - and I'm going to say again that I'm really pleased to be here, I can't emphasize that enough. The real issue here for me is that if you're going to make a recommendation, let's make a recommendation that we can look at.

I know there are a lot of people around the table here who would like to see a \$20,000 figure or \$18,000 - I don't know what it is, quite frankly, and that's my other problem here, and I know we could find that out very quickly. But at any rate, I would have to agree as far as the \$3,000 harvest amount, I think if you took that as a baseline for now and made that right across the spectrum, so that it just wasn't for harvesting, it would be for anybody who would be in a situation like that who had additional income. That to me - and again, I don't know where this is going to go outside of here either, so please understand that I'm just speaking as an individual here, not for my Party or for anybody else - but I would say that would be a good starting point and that's something that maybe I could support here at the table - that \$3,000 amount. That's my comment.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Darcy.

MS. HARVEY: I think maybe we'd definitely support that being spread across all sectors and to all individuals. However, still when the clawback begins, 70 per cent is too much, it's too high a clawback; once the clawback starts, 70 per cent is much too much.

If someone has an extra \$3,000 in their pocket, it's still not that much compared to the actual cost of living and once that clawback starts, 70 per cent is still too much. I think we really need to look at a reduction in the clawback from when it kicks in. I'm not sure what that would be, I think we could talk about that. Also, too, I think it's still important, for all the reasons Lucille mentioned before, that individuals still are allowed until they reach that full year of employment - they're not completely disconnected from Community Services. I think that's really key for all those points that Lucille mentioned before in regard to their resumé and everything.

MR. GOUCHER: If I might just real quickly, again all I'm going to say is I genuinely do believe if we want to see something positive come out of here - because this is all positive - if you want to see something that might happen, I think Stephen's suggestion of \$3,000 across would be something that at least the government could look at. Again, I'm not speaking for them, but as an individual, I would say that it's probably at least a reasonable starting point.

Maybe in the future, as time goes on, maybe other things can be looked at - you know, as far as the investigation of the clawback, the 70 per cent or whatever - but if you want something now, if you want something looked at genuinely right now, I would say that's probably a good starting point because we are - that, to me, would at least be something that we could all take back to the House and at least look at.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Lucille and then Trevor.

MS. HARPER: Okay, if it's going to be \$3,000, if it is across the board and it's not attached to any particular sector or industry, if we maintain the connection with Community Services for the first year of full employment - when it would be longer than that if someone doesn't actually get to the point where they can move off income assistance - if it's framed within a - this is a good first step. This is not the end solution, but this is a good first step. This is what Nova Scotia sees that we can do now and this is framed as a really solid intention of beginning to address poverty - I mean I hear you on that - I think that we could support that, framed in that way.

I think we do need to talk, then, about what the reduction is. So 70 per cent is too high a reduction after that, can that reduction be 50 per cent? That doesn't seem - I mean again, as a first step, so that reduction then becomes 50 per cent as opposed to 70 per cent.

[3:45 p.m.]

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Okay, so I think the recommendation that we're discussing now is \$3,000 across all sectors and then the 50 per cent cuts in. Now how can we phrase this? Keeping the file open with Community Services, what phrasing can we use to get across our point there?

MR. GOUCHER: You're going to start about - you're going to start changing the percentages and everything else. That maybe should be a separate item, because I think genuinely - and I'm saying this, I'm not trying to be difficult here - but I'd like to see something positive come out of this, too, I think we all would.

[3:45 p.m.]

Why don't you make that separate because if you tie the two of them together, and I'm not saying what's going to happen again, I really don't know, but it could tie the two of them together. So I'm just saying that if you're interested in doing that, then maybe it should be separate. I leave it up to . . .

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Well, let's hear from Trevor because he's next on the list and then we'll go back to see whether we want to separate those two recommendations. Trevor?

MR. ZINCK: I just want to say that we have to be very careful not to alienate individuals who are out there currently living and working on minimum wage. What happens in society, as we try to fight poverty and make people aware that poverty actually exists, is if we enable someone now to get up to where the poverty line is - \$20,000, \$21,000 - then you have an individual who is working minimum wage who is making \$14,000 or \$15,000 coming back and saying well, where's the support for me?

So I think that pretty much as Stephen said - it's probably the next phase. The first thing is getting that minimum wage to where it is affordable for somebody to actually live and work. Then the next step would be leading right into having an actual income - a suggested income that is measured for all people. So I just wouldn't want to alienate anyone because that's what's going to happen. People out there are going to say, I work for minimum wage but there's no government help for me and this person is on social assistance and they're also working and they're getting the support. So you want to eliminate someone coming back at somebody who is trying to get off the system.

So I have to agree that the \$3,000 - I mean, I said it back when the Harvest Connection program got announced before - it absolutely has to cross different sectors. I can't take a single mother from Dartmouth North and send her to the Annapolis Valley

because of transportation, housing and child welfare, I can't do that. Bring it and allow her to work here, it's a step and I think it's a step that we can complete.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Okay, well we've got to start somewhere and some of the suggestions that we make may impact on other areas and then perhaps we can bring further recommendations on those. So I'm hearing that the essence of the first recommendation is that we eliminate the clawback for social assistance recipients, up to \$3,000 earnings, across all sectors, stop, right?

MR. GOUCHER: You might want to just put in brackets, not just harvest - just for what it's worth.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Yes. So is there any further discussion on that basic principle? Yes, Carolyn.

MS. EARLE: Saying it in that way implies or includes or whatever, the idea that people are remaining within the assistance system, then, for as long as they need it, so then they have the other benefits.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Yes, it wouldn't close their file in any way. Yes, Lucille.

MS. HARPER: What I hear you asking, though, and wanting to clarify it - I think it's a really important clarification - is it doesn't impact the other benefits that they receive under social assistance, whatever they may be.

MS. EARLE: Medication, or child care or medical or whatever. So this is . . .

MR. MCNEIL: The Harvest Connection program that was in place wasn't affecting any of those. This would just be taking that program and extending it, with all of its rights and privileges, across the job sectors. So yes.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: It's important to clarify that, thank you Carolyn. So is there any further discussion on that? Do we have consensus? Can we live with that, everybody? Good, great.

So do you want to move to the second part of that? Do you want to discuss what the clawback will be after that \$3,000 threshold is reached? Len.

MR. GOUCHER: When this correspondence goes out, isn't that something that could be - and I'm just making a suggestion here and I don't know whether you want to do it that way, maybe some of the comments that have been expressed around here, maybe that is something that could be incorporated into the body of the - once you deal with the actual recommendations maybe you could say, discussed also were concerns around the actual issue of the clawback and the minimum income levels and how long

it should be in place, whether it should be in place for somebody until they reach the \$20,000 level or whatever. Just some of the other issues that have been talked about, as opposed to physically putting it into a motion. I don't know, but sometimes you can accomplish as much that way. At least it is in writing and what was discussed within the committee, and it is there for the next time. Just a thought.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Well, the department will get the transcript of everything that is discussed today.

MR. GOUCHER: Yes, exactly. But still, if you put it in the official letter, you know...

MADAM CHAIRMAN: I think what we want to avoid is encouraging people on social assistance from just working long enough to get that \$3,000 and then not continuing to work. We still want to encourage them to be part of the labour force, so is 70 per cent so much of a deterrent that if they're going to give back \$7 out of every \$10 they earn, would they bother working after they reach that threshold? I don't know.

Lucille and then Elizabeth.

MS. HARPER: I don't even think it's a question of whether they would bother working - it is whether they are able to work at that income level because there are an awful lot of expenses, both financial and human expenses, to going to work. So it has to be a break-even.

Essentially if it's costing you more to go to work than it is to stay home and you're living at a very minimal level, you can't afford to go to work. It's not as though you don't want to or it's not any of that, it's that you can't afford to do it. So what is the level that enables people to have at least a win-win, at least a break-even, that going to work is not costing them, at the out-and-out kind of dollars out of my pocket level? Also, is not costing them so much at the - I don't know how to say that - but sort of at the human level with respect to family, et cetera, that it makes sense for them to say to their family, their children, their whatever, this what I'm doing and this is the cost to the household for a single parent, the cost to this household for me to be out of here and this is the benefit for me to be out of here, and that benefit needs to be higher than the cost.

That's the situation that single moms are in - that the cost often outweighs the benefit - so they're not able to do it. That's part of the reason that you have some of the levels of mental health issues, the lack of self-esteem, et cetera, because people want to provide for their families, they want to be out there, they want to be doing it and not being able to do that has a huge emotional, psychological, personal cost. So how do we make that a win-win?

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Thank you. Elizabeth and then Stephen.

MS. BROWN: I have one question here about - we've been hearing about the harvest program, are there any other programs like that? (Interruption) No, there isn't, is there any hope of getting them and how are we doing it? I'm thinking of the tourist industry, for Heaven's sake, and . . .

MR. GOUCHER: It goes across every sector. It doesn't matter where you work.

MS. EARLE: It doesn't matter what you work.

MS. BROWN: Yes, but there's no actual mention of it so that's a bit of wording.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Any kind of work.

MS. BROWN: Any kind of work, and it's not for the multinationals, it's for local things. It's not for Tim Hortons, for example. (Interruptions) Okay.

MR. MCNEIL: This is probably - I shouldn't put this on the record. What is the level of income when you are removed from the social assistance roll? Is there a certain level? How does someone go off social assistance? Do they just get a job and come off?

MR. GORDON GOSSE: There is a certain level that if you reach, you don't qualify for income assistance.

MR. MCNEIL: Do you know what that is?

MR. GOSSE: I'm not quite sure what it is but it could vary for single people and it all depends. (Interruption) Well, it could be, and then it varies for a single mother with two children, single mother with three children, so there's a scale. When they receive their ESIA statement at the end of the month or the first of the month when the cheques are deposited, they have to bring in their employment statements to the caseworker and then the caseworker decides. So the caseworker - if you made \$500 this month, at the 70 cent dollars, they determine well, you get only \$288 this month because that's the limit. So each receipt that they pass in at the end of the month, that's how the caseworker decides how much ESIA benefits they're going to receive. It's on a scale that they do have in the office.

MR. MCNEIL: I guess if we could get to what is the national or the annual level of income that would be . . .

MS. HARPER: I think I can tell you that. Everyone has a level of assistance assigned to them, according to what they're paying for rent, et cetera, along with their personal allowances, et cetera. Once their earned income reaches the same level, that level of their social assistance income, they are no longer on assistance. So if you're eligible ostensibly for \$12,000 of assistance for the year, say, once you reach that

\$12,000 earned income then your assistance cuts out, okay? So that's where it is. So that's where that clawback kind of keeps people below that level on an ongoing basis.

MR. MCNEIL: Yes, and the reason I was asking for an annual amount, I knew the monthly situation where you plugged into the figure but I was using the annual amount, because if we put a motion forward, if we start at the \$3,000 limit where the clawback begins, and let's say it is \$12,000, I don't know that, I think we need to figure . . .

MR. HARPER: Well I'm pulling that out. What I'm saying is that . . .

MR. MCNEIL: Yes, I know, but we can do a sliding scale of clawback from the 3 to the 12, which will end up, obviously, working our way to where they claw it all back. If we said from 3 to 5 they would only claw back 30 per cent; from 5 to 7, they would claw back 50 per cent; from 7, you know - allow the department to work on a sliding scale of the clawback from that way forward, but you have to have a beginning and an end point.

MR. GOUCHER: I'll tell you, one of the things that has given me great concern today and just coming out of some of the questions, including my own uncertainty of some of the issues, is we're sitting here making recommendations without any real knowledge of what the impact is going to be and it is very difficult. We can make pie-in-the-sky asks, recommendations, whatever, but in reality nothing will happen with it. I mean we're talking about the \$3,000, I personally feel fairly comfortable with that but that's just me. I have nobody here. We're talking about minimum wage, we're talking about the subsistence, we're talking about very important things to do with people's lives and we really don't have the information here with us and that makes me nervous from the standpoint that whether we're talking clawback, whether we talking 70 per cent, 60 per cent, 50 per cent - I don't know what we're talking about but the thing is, I don't know what the implications are and I don't know what the implications are from the departmental perspective, I don't know what the implications are from a budget perspective, what that will physically do.

The question that you raised - because you've got a clawback, how is that going to impact on the budget and why does it impact - wouldn't it make more sense to let them keep it? I don't know, and I'm being very honest here, I don't know. I'm a politician, I'm not a bureaucrat with the facts and figures in front of me and that particular issue gives me great concern here today.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Well you raise a good point and there's another approach we could take here. I'm assuming that we have the three - the minimum wage, the clawback and the extended Pharmacare on the paper, but I think we're all agreed that we want to support a comprehensive poverty reduction strategy as well. If we dealt with that first then we might be able to refer some of these smaller issues to that group. Yes, Leo.

MR. GLAVINE: Well to go back to where I started, I guess, probably two hours ago now - or at least two hours and 15 minutes ago that I spoke - and said that the concept of a poverty reduction strategy for Nova Scotia is laudable at all levels and we need to move in that direction, but that's over a period of time. It's embracing a lot of people and a very knowledgeable and dedicated group who want the province to move in that direction, including us politicians. But secondly, last year when we took those recommendations, they were what I call first steps but significant steps, and we had a couple of them acted upon.

[4:00 p.m.]

What we're doing here is to once again recommend, but the letter went to the department and the department was the one that flushed out what it would cost, as wonderful as it would be to have every recipient with a phone in their home, if that's a several million dollar item that just is not achievable right now, then we'll be informed of that.

I think our work is to be responsive to the people who spoke this morning and to recommend some positive actions and then in time again, the department will let us know whether this is really doable and we're going to act on it, or this one here, we need to put on the back burner for now. But as you said, Marilyn, include it in our comprehensive strategy reduction piece.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: I just don't want us to get bogged down on what the clawback should be after the \$3,000 threshold. It doesn't look as though we're going to have unanimity, so we can either refer that general issue to the department as one of, as you say, our first steps, or we can refer it to the committee looking at the provincial strategy. I think we need to move on to some of the other issues, so how do you want to handle the clawback after the \$3,000 threshold is reached? Do you want to just refer it to the department to look at something that's more realistic and doable? Or do you want to refer it to the committee?

MR. KEITH BAIN: I suggest that it be reviewed to the department and that way they'll be able to put the figures out.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: How do people feel about asking the department to review that?

MR. ZINCK: I just want it reported back, we want the findings reported back.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Okay, do you want to put a time limit on that?

MR. ZINCK: Perhaps even knowing the implications to budgetary processes, if we did perhaps implement a sliding scale or we set a 70, 50, 30 type of thing, we

should put specifics to them. Let us know what impact it would have if we went to 50 or 30.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Okay, so we're asking the department to review the clawback and give us the impact of specific options.

MR. ZINCK: I'd say a sliding scale.

MR. MCNEIL: You reverse what we - just say to the department, after the \$3,000 if you would reverse the present, instead of 70/30 that it be 30/70. What is the impact on a sliding scale, until somebody comes off the assistance roll, what's the impact? And we send that to the department and ask them to report back to us in six months. (Interruption)

Well you have to remember that the department is going through the budget process. When the budget hits here, good luck.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Okay, Lucille.

MS. HARPER: When we're asking them to review that, could we at least ask for a cost-benefit analysis, so that we're at least - because my fear is that it's going to come back and it's going to say well, it's going to cost us this much and we don't have it and they won't have done any analysis around what is the short-term, medium-term and long-term benefit of doing that. I think if we did that analysis, it would make it a lot more likely that we would get some movement on . . .

MADAM CHAIRMAN: I think that makes sense.

MR. MCNEIL: Yes, and it would be great information actually to develop the long-term strategy, to have that cost analysis.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Okay, so do we have consensus that our second recommendation is asking the Department of Community Services to review the clawback, to look at the impact of reversing the 70/30 to 30/70, and report back within six months and include in that the cost-benefit analysis over the short, medium and long term?

MR. GOUCHER: And mention on a sliding scale.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Okay, as the second option? Okay. So do we have agreement around the table for that? Good.

MS. HARPER: Marilyn, can I just say that any agreement I think that we have for this is really under the proviso that there will be a poverty reduction strategy and that these really are short term, because I know we're going to go back to our

organizations and they're going to say, what? So we really need to have that clearly spelled out, that the overarching goal is a poverty reduction strategy.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Well, why don't we move back to that and get that on the table so everyone feels reassured that when we continue the discussion on the others, that those are short-term action recommendations. Gordie.

MR. GOSSE: My question is that, usually in a standing committee, we always have motions. I know we have the forum today so are we being able, as committee members today, to make motions? I took notes this morning and I've drawn up some motions that I took from what people had said today. I'm wondering, are we going to be allowed to do that today, as committee members, to make a motion?

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Well, the reason I was using this approach is because I thought perhaps we wanted to practice what we suggested, that the commission or task force, or whatever we're going to call it, is going to - the way they're going to operate, that they're going to include community as well as official government representatives.

We don't have any formal mandate being combined, community and standing committee around the table, so I thought if we reached consensus, then someone could move from the committee at the end that the Standing Committee on Community Services ratifies - so that's officially coming from both this combined discussion group and also is officially endorsed by the standing committee. Otherwise, we're consulting with the community but not allowing them to be part of framing or the decision making, which is the weakness we had talked about earlier as to process.

So you can put the motions on the floor, but as a recommendation - do you know what I mean?

MR. GLAVINE: We're not operating in here as a standing committee, that's the whole piece. Yes, so it's a forum, that's why recommendations (Interruptions)

MR. GOSSE: I know that, but I mean I did take some notes and there were some motions that I would like to put forward as of today. Can I give you an example of one, just as an example of a motion that I took notes this morning that, you know. Somebody, one of the presenters here today, had asked about the review within the Department of Community Services, so I thought a motion would be that the internal ESIA report be made public, when final, and that it be tabled in the Legislature and made available on a Web site and in the public libraries and to be part of that following the release of the internal review, the Department of Community Services follow up with a public consultation across the province and input from organizations and individuals with the input recorded and released publicly, like the continuing care consultation report process that we did a while back.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Well, you can make that as a suggestion (Interruption) Pardon?

MR. GLAVINE: My reaction to that, Gordie, would be one of the things, if you remember over the past 12 months, after the Forum on Poverty, was that remember we kept doing some updates and we kept taking 15, 20 minutes, and I would say take that to the standing committee when we meet and bring that forward in that context. This is a little different forum, I think, for this. Yes, that's what I would do.

MR. GOSSE: Okay, no, I'm just wondering what the process would be. So I'll take all of these motions that I had written down today, put them in my pocket and save them for our next meeting.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: But some of the issues may relate to the recommendations that are brought forward now and you can help us with some of the wording.

MR. GLAVINE: Yes, recommendations are great.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Yes, it is just a matter of changing it from a motion to a recommendation and if we ratify it in the last five minutes, as a standing committee, they will go forward, or you can hold onto them and we can deal with them (Interruptions)

So I guess I need a little direction here. Do you want to finish looking at the other two short-term action suggestions - the Pharmacare and the minimum wage - or do we want to get that overarching, comprehensive, poverty reduction strategy suggestion on the table?

We've got 20 minutes left, so let's deal with the big picture first and at least make sure that moves ahead. Who wants to word it or frame it?

MR. GLAVINE: I would recommend, as a summary position of today's forum, that we have an all-Party committee work with the organizations across the province involved with poverty issues, to develop a comprehensive poverty reduction strategy for Nova Scotia.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Okay, so let's have a little bit of discussion on that.

MR. GLAVINE: If you want to frame it differently, that's fine, but I think that's where we need to go.

MR. MCNEIL: I go back to - I would like the committee to look at the bill that I put in front of the House. The members of the committee, if they have issues inside the bill that we need to change - but I think in order to make this effective it has to be

something on the floor of the House if the government is going to be committed to doing it.

If we're going to have an all-Party committee, we need the ministers, we need the government officials from those departments at this table. I really believe that's where this needs to go. It needs to become a bill on the floor of the House and committing the government to taking action in terms of this strategy.

Our committee can come together and they can read it and that's about it. I just think that we can change it, we can do it, but I really believe it needs to be a bill on the floor of the House that commits the government - the Department of Health, the Department of Justice, the Department of Community Services, the Status of Women, Finance - to sit down at the table with the stakeholders to make this a reality.

If the Province of Newfoundland and Labrador can have a strategy to reduce poverty, and a willingness from their government to make this happen, with real concrete timetables that has happened on the floor of the House, the Province of Nova Scotia can certainly make it happen, and I think that's where it needs to happen. Whether it's the bill that I presented or whether we do something - I'd like to see the committee, obviously for selfish reasons maybe, either recommend this bill, that the government call this bill coming up or introduce their own bill coming up, that they're going to put on the floor to set up this Act and this strategy around poverty.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Carolyn.

MS. EARLE: I wanted to ask, what is the status of this now in the Legislature of Stephen's bill?

MR. MCNEIL: Right now the bill is just - we've gone through second reading and it's sitting there, it hasn't - it's not anywhere, it's dormant. The government could call it if they wanted to . . .

MS. EARLE: Like it's tabled.

MR. MCNEIL: Yes, the government could call it, if they wanted to, for third reading - if they wanted to.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Until the government calls it, it goes nowhere.

MR. MCNEIL: But they could introduce their own bill, as well, if they wanted to.

MR. GLAVINE: Marilyn . . .

MADAM CHAIRMAN: I'll come right to you in a minute, Leo. Perhaps our recommendation would be to either introduce or call a bill - I mean could we leave it open?

MR. GLAVINE: I mean, I wasn't going to recommend bringing forward Bill No. 74. I didn't want to assist Stephen's leadership in any way or anything. (Laughter) You know in a very serious vein, I put forth as a recommendation of those who took the time to come here today, that we, as a group, embrace a concept of a poverty reduction strategy for the province. If government wants to bring a bill, or whatever manner it's done, I'm for doing it, that's the way I see this. We should all have great ownership on this issue, it should not be a partisan thing at all.

[4:15 p.m.]

MADAM CHAIRMAN: So if we said that we ask the government to take action on a poverty reduction strategy . . .

MR. GLAVINE: Yes.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: . . . would that cover all the small "p" political interests around the table? Yes, Lucille.

MS. HARPER: Not unless it says specifically that it is done through working with community-based organizations.

MR. GLAVINE: Yes, I think that's . . .

MADAM CHAIRMAN: I think that's a given. (Interruptions) No, you're right.

MR. MCNEIL: When the government either calls my bill or brings their own bill forward, we can debate what's in it. I mean that's why the first and second readings.

MR. GLAVINE: And amendments can be made and we agree with you on that, or I certainly agree with you.

MS. HARPER: Yes, and if the committee put forth the recommendation - I mean I think this is good, so whoever puts forward something like this, this is pretty comprehensive, this looks pretty good to me.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: I guess my only concern with the bill is at least one representative from each of the following, and then it lists a number of organizations. Well, there may be some organizations that are left out of this. I'm thinking of the Transition House Association or something like that. This is an excellent start, but there may be some other additional members who need to be added, and I'm just concerned that in the bill it seems to limit those.

MR. MCNEIL: If they call mine, I'll accept your friendly amendments.
(Laughter)

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Pardon?

MR. MCNEIL: If they call my bill, I'll accept your friendly amendments.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Okay. I mean if we do nothing more today, we do have to get our support for the poverty reduction strategy that has meaningful involvement from community and non-profit organizations in this province. So do we have consensus that has to be a priority? Okay, great.

Now quickly, before we end, we still have to return to the short-term action items - the minimum wage and the extended Pharmacare. We can agree to refer those to the poverty reduction committee, but we just need to make it a joint decision on how to handle them.

MS. EARLE: Well, about the minimum wage - if the minister is required to make a decision, I'm just trying to think of what happens after he makes the decision. He doesn't have to come to the House with a decision, so there essentially wouldn't necessarily be any debate on it, unless he asks the Cabinet or caucus.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: So you're suggesting that as one of the recommendations coming out of today, that we ask the government to increase the minimum wage in steps, until a living income is achieved? Is that . . .

MS. EARLE: Well, I mean (Interruption)

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Well, perhaps it's the market basket measure.

MR. GOUCHER: I'm just asking. (Interruptions)

MS. HARVEY: . . . a measure, but I'd say at least to a poverty line, whichever one is chosen, but I think that's the minimum standard that any community organization and anyone can accept, that someone who's working for full-time wages should be able to achieve.

MR. GOUCHER: I've just got to raise the issue and I'm just raising it from the standpoint - and people will not like this - of some of the business people and the heat that government constantly takes from every sector. I'm sorry, I'm just trying to be honest here, there's no point in shoving it under the carpet, it should be raised. (Interruption) That's fine, that's good, I'm glad you have one.

All I'm saying is that when you start talking about stepping the income and you start talking about stepping minimum wage, and as it goes up and every time, as

everybody knows, we take some severe comments from the business sector, from many parts of it, that's why I'm not prepared to support just a blanket motion that it's increased to whatever.

If you're talking about an increase, we'd suggest that there be an increase in the minimum wage, I could probably go along with that, but just to leave an open door - I mean you can't. I just reasonably can't, under any circumstance say, just an open door and we're going to raise it to \$22 an hour. I'm just saying that because nobody's saying what the amount is.

MR. MCNEIL: The motion was to . . .

MR. GOUCHER: To step it up to (Interruption)

MR. MCNEIL: The poverty line, yes. You're not committed to it . . .

MADAM CHAIRMAN: And possibly the market basket figure because from what Lucille is saying, that's the fairest to people living in rural Nova Scotia, because it includes the impact of transportation.

MR. GOUCHER: I realize that, but I'm trying to be realistic here. I'm not going - I'm going to be straight, up front with everybody here, I'm not going to leave this room and support something that I'm not going to go in that House and support. I won't do that to you, I won't do it to anybody. All I'm trying to do is be realistic and objective here with regard to this minimum wage issue.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Fair enough, but I guess we wanted the message to get across to Nova Scotians that work is valuable and they have to be paid enough to live.

MR. GOUCHER: I'm not questioning that. What I'm questioning is that I want to know - if I'm going to support this then I want to know what I'm supporting. Again, all I'm trying to do is be honest with people in this room. I'm not going to placate everybody in this room and say yeah, yeah, yeah, and I'm just going to walk out and forget about it. I'm here because I want to be here. Maybe my comments aren't well received all the time, but do you know what? Such is life, we all disagree on things.

I'm trying to be honest here. I cannot and I will not support just an open-ended motion on minimum wage, because there are significant, far-reaching impacts on it, whether we're obligated to it or not, as a committee. Don't get me wrong - I fully understand what you're saying, but I think we've got to be honest and open with our comments here and mine is where it's at, and I've said it. Thank you.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Well, what about something like recommending to the Minister of Finance to do a cost-benefit analysis of increasing the minimum wage, because there are benefits.

MR. GOUCHER: Well, do you know what? There are benefits to everything, but the problem is there's the other side of it, too. When minimum wage goes up, so does the cost of the product or so does the cost of the service, and then something else, there are a lot of snowballing effects. It's fine for us to raise the minimum wage, but every time we do it - and I have no problem, don't get me wrong, I have no problem with looking at an increase to the minimum wage, that is not the issue here. But just to give a carte blanche increase to minimum wage without any - talking about steps, you can talk about anything you want, but I think there has to be some reality injected here.

Without question, I think that's a good point and it's something you can look at, but I think there are other issues here. I'll leave it at that.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Lucille and then Stephen.

MS. HARPER: I can appreciate, I think, what it is you're saying and I think one of the very important things that we've done today is, we have agreed to a poverty reduction strategy, so when anything that we're talking about being stepped is going to be longer than the very immediate, short term. So if the question is, what do we do about a minimum wage in the immediate, short term, because we really are looking at if not just the current budget - because this doesn't really affect the budget but it is a legislative item. So perhaps what we want to do, coming out of here today, is to recommend that this is an issue that is a top priority for the poverty reduction group to come back with some recommendations around that and to really look critically at what has happened in other places that have raised the minimum wage as a poverty reduction strategy - for example, Ireland, et cetera.

I think there are a number of different ways of arguing and presenting this. So having said that, my question is, can we recommend that by the end of the 2007-08 fiscal year, we have increased the minimum wage to \$9 an hour? What would you put on . . .

MR. GOUCHER: But I'm not going to support anything that's going to put either an open door or a figure. If you want to say that over the period of the fiscal year that the government of the day, whoever that's going to be - it may be us or somebody else - is going to look at the issue of the minimum wage, then I've no problem. But if you're talking about setting a figure and - because you're picking a figure out of the air.

MS. HARPER: Not exactly.

MR. GOUCHER: You are, you're picking a figure out of the air really - and I'm sorry, I shouldn't be getting personal - without any of us having any information of what the impacts on that are going to be. Sure, there are some very positive impacts from the standpoint of people like my daughter, people like other people, where they're going to have a little more money, but there are other impacts to the economy, to the

business sector. Maybe that's not totally what we're here to talk about, but do you know what? It's the business sector and it's the businesses that are going to give these people a chance to get out of the hole. I guess that's all I can say.

As a committee, you can recommend what you want but as an individual, I can't support that. If you want to look at the issue of minimum wage, I have no problem doing that at all and I think that's a good recommendation, but that's as far as I will go.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Elizabeth.

MS. BROWN: One of the comments in the labour - okay, right here, one's looking at minimum wage. "The Committee recommends that the Province adopt a multifaceted approach like the one used in Ireland in dealing with the problems of the working poor. Ireland has been very successful in reducing the numbers of people living in poverty . . .". There are no figures involved in that but it's a case of looking at it which, in a couple of years, would produce some figures, I assume. That has come from the labour, as one of their recommendations in a response to questions about the minimum wage.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Stephen.

MR. MCNEIL: I think we're getting caught up in this, but I don't know if we really have to deal with the issue. I mean quite frankly, I don't think we can - that working towards raising the minimum wage so that we reach the poverty line is a bad thing for all of us to agree on. I think that should be our - I mean, we shouldn't be trying to leave people in poverty, but I think the group that we're talking about, if the province is going to strike a committee to build a strategy around poverty, we'll have to deal with the issue of minimum wage. It will have to be dealt with inside of that strategy.

So I think for us to come out and ask the government to make these commitments, we're kind of prejudging the work of the committee that's going to build the strategy around that, because I think it will be part of it - it has to be. They'll put the recommendation to government at that point.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Well, we're basically running out of time, so I think we're going to have to assume that the extended Pharmacare and the minimum wage will be topics to be studied and recommendations made by the poverty reduction task force.

Now, I'm just wondering, does someone from the standing committee want to move a motion endorsing the recommendations that came out of the round table this afternoon?

MR. MCNEIL: Can you read the recommendations to us?

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Okay. The first one was recommending that the \$3,000 threshold be used for - sorry, that the clawback be removed up to a \$3,000 threshold for social assistance recipients, across all sectors of work within Nova Scotia.

The second one was to ask the Department of Community Services to review the clawback after the threshold is reached, to look at options such as reversing the 70/30 to 30/70, meaning that they could earn up to 70 per cent before the clawback took effect, or a sliding scale; do a cost-benefit analysis within six months and report back to the standing committee; and also look at the short-, medium- and long-term benefits of both of those options.

[4:30 p.m.]

The third recommendation was to recommend to the government to create the poverty reduction strategy committee, which would include representatives from all three Parties and have meaningful involvement of the voluntary sector organizations that were discussed, and we can certainly mention the list that is included in your bill as a starting point.

MR. MCNEIL: But I think that should not be - I think the committee should be encouraging the government to introduce a bill or piece of legislation to strike a committee.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Okay, we can change that wording.

So those are the three recommendations that we've reached consensus on and I'm just wondering if someone from this . . .

MR. GLAVINE: I would move that in the form of a motion from today's forum.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Thank you, Leo. Do we have a seconder? Trevor.

Is there any discussion among committee members on that motion?

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

The motion is unanimously carried.

So just before we leave, I have some thank-yous to do. I particularly want to thank all the participants in today's forum, especially the representatives from the Community Action on Homelessness, Community Advocates Network, Face of Poverty Consultation, Women's Centres CONNECT!, Affordable Energy Coalition and the Public Good Society of Dartmouth. Thank you, too, to the members of the standing committee. It has been a long day, but I know this is a very important topic. We're showing our re-commitment of the new standing committee to this issue, and

we'll continue to pursue it both in our monthly meetings as well as pursuing other opportunities.

I want to thank the legislative staff who prepared the room, from Province House, Peter and Kate; from Legislative Television, Paul, Blake and Will; from Hansard Reporting Services, Rhonda and Jeff; and certainly our committee clerk, Mora Stevens. So thank you all very, very much and I'm sure we'll meet again on this issue. Thank you.

The meeting is adjourned.

[The committee adjourned at 4:32 p.m.]