

HANSARD

NOVA SCOTIA HOUSE OF ASSEMBLY

COMMITTEE

ON

COMMUNITY SERVICES

Friday, June 13, 2008

Committee Room 1

**Department of Community Services
Re: Affordable Housing Program/Homelessness**

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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. Manning MacDonald

[Hon. Ronald Chisholm was replaced by Hon. Richard Hurlburt]
[Mr. Gordon Gosse was replaced by Mr. Leonard Preyra.]

In Attendance:
Ms. Sherri Mitchell
Legislative Committee Clerk

WITNESSES

Department of Community Services

Ms. Judith Ferguson
Deputy Minister

Mr. Dave Ryan
Executive Director - Employment Support,
Income Assistance & Housing

Mr. Dan Troke
Director - Housing Services

HALIFAX, FRIDAY, JUNE 13, 2008

STANDING COMMITTEE ON COMMUNITY SERVICES

9:00 A.M.

CHAIRMAN
Ms. Marilyn More

MADAM CHAIRMAN: I'd like to call to order this meeting of the Standing Committee on Community Services. Welcome very much, Deputy Minister Ferguson. I'll let you introduce your officials a little later in the proceedings.

I just wanted to mention to members of the committee a slight change in the agenda. Under "Committee Business", I think we'll do two things, with your permission; we'll deal with correspondence that has come in since the last meeting and also, rather than individually set dates for incoming requests to meet with us, I'm wondering if perhaps we might set an organizational meeting sometime in the Fall to deal with the priority list rather than deal with them individually. So that's what we'll be discussing at the end of the meeting under committee business. So with that change, we'll go ahead with the agenda as circulated. Perhaps we'll start with introductions.

[The committee members introduced themselves.]

MADAM CHAIRMAN: We're also joined today by an observer, Jana Hodgson, who is going to be a new committee clerk. She's observing today and we want to welcome her. It's great to have you with us.

Deputy minister, we have a very important topic this morning - affordable housing program and homelessness. So if you would like to introduce your staff, we'll get underway and thank you so much, I realize how busy all of your schedules are this time of the year and we appreciate you coming this morning.

MS. JUDITH FERGUSON: Thank you very much, Madam Chairman, and committee members. We're very happy to be here on this sunny Friday the 13th, and I agree with you, to talk about a very important topic. We've brought quite a bit of information with us this morning. Hopefully, that will inform the members of the committee and assist you. As you know, when I appear here, I normally bring some members, I'm lucky to have an exceptional team with me at the Department of Community Services, and I would like to introduce Dan Troke, on my right, who is the Director of Housing, and Dave Ryan, on my left, who is the Executive Director of Employment Support, Income Assistance and Housing. So they will be with me today to help provide additional details to provide assistance to the committee.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: If you would like to start.

MS. FERGUSON: Madam Chairman, we have done a presentation this morning that I thought might help inform the committee. I'm cognizant of the time and I don't want to take up too much time so I'll go through it relatively quickly and then perhaps if there are questions resulting from that, we're happy to answer them, if that's okay with the committee.

Madam Chairman, I guess I would start with why housing matters. Obviously, as most people know, one of the key determinants of health is a safe and secure physical environment. Safe, secure and affordable housing is fundamental to achieving healthy child development, stable family relationships, education and literacy, and family wealth. Housing is the essential base upon which to deliver social support services and it's fundamental to personal well-being.

In terms of what is affordable housing, when we use that term, in general it is either rental or ownership housing, priced to be accessible to people who cannot afford to rent or purchase a home at the prevailing market rates. It is housing that is safe, appropriate and accessible, and where shelter costs are 30 per cent or less of a household gross annual income.

In terms of the programs we provide in the Department of Community Services, there are a number of them. In terms of public and social housing, we have 7,700 seniors and 4,400 family households living in public housing units and another 9,000 households living in co-operative, non-profit housing, and rural and native housing in Nova Scotia. We also have a number of repair and adaptation programs that we have a number of acronyms that we affectionately call them - SCAP, PHERP and RRAP - and those are obviously the Senior Citizens Assistance Program, the Provincial Housing Emergency Repair Program,

and the Residential Rehabilitation Assistance suite of programs, including the Home Adaptations for Seniors Independence program.

Finally, we help to make home ownership more accessible to low-income Nova Scotians through our mortgage programs, which includes the Family Modest Housing Program which provides mortgage funds of up to \$70,000 for Nova Scotians to build or buy a modest home.

In terms of the clients in our department: seniors - 7,700 households or 9,000 senior tenants live in public housing and over 1,300 seniors annually receive home repairs; low-income families - there are 4,400 family households or 9,000 family tenants living in public housing and approximately 1,500 families annually receive home repair assistance; and non-elderly single clients - approximately 700 living in our public housing units across the province.

Madam Chairman, this is a slide that we've used in the department and with some of our stakeholder groups to try to categorize some of the housing pressures currently facing us in Nova Scotia. I'll run quickly through them: Obviously, affordability, which is more acute in HRM, although it is an issue across the province, particularly in some pockets across the province; many low-income renters and homeowner households - we have a need to repair and renovate an aging housing stock here in Nova Scotia; the age of our population - the whole demographic change, particularly in rural areas and small towns across Nova Scotia; the population shift, which is also related to the demographic change, the rural to urban migration - especially to HRM - and particularly among younger households; and a high proportion of disabled persons. As I know you're aware, Nova Scotia has the highest proportion of persons with disabilities in Canada and this is particularly impacting in some of our communities. In recognition of these pressures or characteristics, the department offers a variety of housing programs and solutions.

I'd like to talk briefly for a moment about public housing - 1,200 to 1,500 applicants per year are placed in public housing and that's a turnover rate of approximately 13 to 15 per cent. We have a wait list management system designed to ensure fair access and we've actually done a fair bit of work on our wait list management system this year and are hoping to do more in the coming year, and we'd be pleased to talk about that later. There are priorities given for health and safety issues in terms of placement of tenants.

The demand for public housing is consistent across all areas of our province, but it is highest in the Annapolis Valley and in HRM. We currently have approximately 4,000 applicants on our wait list for public housing.

I should note that priority placement is given to households in situations where there are issues of family violence, where homes have been condemned for health reasons or where a member of a household needs to be near a hospital for treatment - for example, if someone required dialysis.

In terms of our repair programs, we had a budget of over \$15 million for 2007-08. Our applications are processed in chronological order. Emergency repairs are given priority and we have approximately 2,000 applications on our wait list and, again, we do have a wait list management process associated with that. Included in that \$15 million is funding we've received from the Department of Health this year - that is the third year we've received this funding - and as a result of that, 450 additional people have been able to remain in their homes due to the repairs we were able to do with those funds.

I'd like to talk for a few minutes about affordable housing. It's something we've been working at very diligently in the department and are seeing some significant and, I think, exciting benefits. Just quickly, by way of background, there was an agreement with the federal government in 2002 to increase the supply of affordable housing in Nova Scotia - that's a 50-50 cost-shared deal between the province and the federal government, and the funding available through affordable housing was \$56 million.

To date, funds have been committed to create or preserve 1,069 homes to March, 2008, 170 new rentals were created in 2007-08 and to date, \$45 million in funding has been committed.

I believe larger maps than seen on the screen were provided to all members of the committee. I think what you'll see by that map is the extent and depth of the Affordable Housing Program from 2003 to 2008. The funding has touched almost every part of the province and has begun to meet the needs of low-income families and seniors through new rental and preservation efforts. I think the map also outlines actually by colour coding the type of Affordable Housing Program that was in each of those individual communities.

To close, I just thought our housing staff often have some great pictures which actually show the good work that's going on across the province, and I just wanted to highlight a few of those projects here today. These are some new rental housing projects. This one is Wolfville Court in the Annapolis Valley - that's 20 affordable units - and that building is now occupied. The next is a photo of the Kent Fields Estates project in Kentville which has 32 units. This is a photo of a 20-unit new deal development in Sydney Mines on Pitt Street. This is a 24-unit completed project in New Minas.

Not all rental projects are large, they're varying sizes, so we wanted to show you a smaller one, as illustrated by this eight-unit seniors' unit project that has been built in St. Andrews.

In addition, we have a Home Preservation Program that is geared to preserving a home that might otherwise be lost so that a particular person or family can stay in their home in their community, and the impact of the investment in repairs is evident in terms of the before and after pictures on this slide. However, what may not be as evident, but just as equally important, is the impact of the investment for a Nova Scotian homeowner. Preservations, like this one, allow eligible Nova Scotians to keep their homes - homes in

many cases that they've lived in for decades and that their families have lived in before them. It also allows people to maintain their independence and stay in their communities.

In addition, like the Home Preservation Program, the program is geared to preserving rental units that might otherwise be removed from the marketplace due to their very poor condition, and this shows you both before repairs and after repairs.

[9:15 a.m.]

I'll quickly review the high points of the Affordable Housing Trust, which is in addition to the monies that we've received through the Affordable Housing Program. The federal government provided money to all the provinces and this resulted in \$23 million for Nova Scotia over three years. It's a one-time federal investment; the funds cannot be used for operations. In Nova Scotia, we're going to be investing the funds in capital repairs and regeneration of units at risk of being lost to the social housing stock - obviously, it's very important to us that we don't lose any of our existing units - additional housing preservation and rental preservation, and new rental housing units.

We've also started construction of some units under the Affordable Housing Trust and these are four family units on the Main Street of Yarmouth and two family units on Maria Street in North Sydney.

In addition, we have the Off-Reserve Aboriginal Housing Trust. This trust involves \$7.8 million over three years. Department staff, in particular Dan, have been working with aboriginal organization and our Office of Aboriginal Affairs to deliver a collaborative approach to deliver the funds to the aboriginal households off-reserve. This has been very successful and I know a model that has been looked at by other jurisdictions in terms of how to work together to deliver these funds.

Although the provinces are given flexibility in use, the funds are not intended to replace other areas of provincial funding and cannot be used for rent supplements. It's our hope that the trust will address short-term housing needs of our off-reserve aboriginal community.

So just to total, Madam Chairman, a quick summary of our affordable housing monies and trust fund deliverables over the next three years, for a total of \$15.2 million. In addition to these monies, we anticipate continued investments of \$46 million in home repairs through our provincial programs through the RRAP suite of programs that we deliver in the province.

Madam Chairman, in terms of the homelessness issue, obviously as members of this committee would certainly be well aware, homelessness is a very complex issue and it will not be solved by one department in government alone and requires a government approach. DSC provides support through shelters, transition housing, income assistance, home repair and preservation, and social housing. But we've been working with a number of our colleagues in other departments - Health, Education, Justice, Health Promotion and

Protection - to come up with an approach that recognizes the number of challenges resulting in homelessness. Also, all of government believes in the importance of prevention and that's definitely a focus that we've been looking at as we've been discussing the issue of homelessness.

We currently have a review of a number of our shelters in HRM ongoing and hope to have that information ready in the next couple of months. We also recently completed a review of recovery houses and have met with them, which has resulted in a very good process both for us and for them.

So, Madam Chairman, thank you very much. I appreciate the indulgence to go through the presentation and now look forward to questions from members of the committee.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Thank you. You certainly covered a lot of information in a brief time and I appreciate you recognizing that we do like to spend the majority of our time at the meeting on face-to-face questioning. Thank you very much.

Leonard.

MR. LEONARD PREYRA: Thank you very much for your presentation, it's a great education for me. I know we've been involved in a lot of casework but I haven't actually seen the overall policy stated as simply as it was today. As you know, I represent Halifax Citadel which is the most expensive piece of real estate in the province, the most difficult place to get affordable housing, and affordable housing takes on a whole new meaning in Halifax Citadel.

I have a number of constituency-related questions because we have this situation with the most expensive piece of real estate, but it also attracts many of the people from outlying areas who come to Halifax Citadel and you have street-involved people and homeless people on Spring Garden Road and Barrington Street. So I have questions relating to the constituency, but they're connected to what's happening outside.

I was in Antigonish last week and talked with the Antigonish Women's Resource Centre. They said that the most critical situation they are facing is with young people who are at risk in transition, who are temporarily thrown out of their homes or leave their homes, or run afoul of the education system. So they find themselves kind of dislocated for brief periods of time and then eventually leave Antigonish and go to places like Halifax. They said what they really need is some short-term transitional housing there for these young people so their needs can be addressed. If there's a timely intervention at that point there, we could save ourselves a lot of trouble down the road.

I'm wondering why it has been so difficult for a place like the Antigonish Women's Resource Centre and for a place like Antigonish to develop these programs and to get Community Services support for a program like that.

MS. FERGUSON: I'm glad you brought that up because that also - that's the perfect example of how homelessness is really an issue much broader than the actual housing context, although there's obviously a housing piece to that. Those exact situations with those youth that the Antigonish Women's Resource Centre brought to your attention are exactly some of the situations we're trying to address through the Child and Youth Strategy that we have with the Nunn Commission. As you may be aware, we've set up a number of pilots - in terms of actually being able to work with youth at risk - to put plans in place with those particular youth that would address the housing piece, the education piece, the justice piece, in the event that they're in that system. We're actually in the process of hiring youth navigators and the youth navigators will cover the entire province. Part of their role will be to actually put plans in place for these youth.

What I will say from a programmatic point of view, what's been shown to us is that for the most part, broad-based programs don't work for these youth who are in crisis. What they really need is almost individual case plans, for each individual youth. So the focus of the pilots under the Nunn Commission will actually be individual case planning. So while broad-based programs may be helpful in some cases and there may be enough of a need, and that's something that we will have to look at, our focus right now has been to set up individual case plans. So part of the youth navigator's role, in conjunction with some of the other pilots that we have established in Nunn, would be to look at the housing piece of that youth, in addition to the other challenges that they're facing in their life.

MR. PREYRA: Thank you. I think part of the issue there is that in order to do the casework, in order to deliver the programs, you need them in one place and you need them in a stable setting, and that's just not there. You can't find them under those circumstances. If they're wandering around Antigonish looking for support, or if they've moved out of town, they fall between the cracks and they disappear and they don't appear on Community Services' radar until they get into much more serious trouble. It seems to be the case that they really get the attention only when they get into trouble. That really was at the heart of what Nunn was saying, as well, and we don't seem to have an answer even in the Child and Youth Strategy to deal with those situations yet.

MS. FERGUSON: Well, I guess I'd say two things to that. First, that really is supposed to be the role of the youth navigator - they are to be prevention, so to speak, so that youth don't have to go through the child welfare door or come into that direct contact with the department. Their role would be to assist those youth before things get further down the piece.

We also have a pilot in the youth, in the Nunn, which is wrap-around services. It is a number of people regionally, from Education, Health, Justice, Community Services, and they all meet around those individual youth and look at a plan, which would include a housing piece for that child. I couldn't agree more with you, that obviously they need a stable place, an environment where they can stay that they're safe, so they can deal with the other challenges in their lives. That's exactly the role of what these wrap-around pilots will be for these individual youths.

So with these wrap-around pilots, working with those youth navigators, it is our hope we'll come up with plans that are individual for that youth or child and help stabilize them to get to the point that we can begin to use some of the other programming that's in the system.

MR. PREYRA: I don't mean to get into an argument with you but the youth navigators, this position that's been created, and the wrap-around programmers, they're not doing anything that's different from what the Antigonish Women's Resource Centre is doing and has been doing for a long time. You could say that these front-line groups have already identified a problem. They know what services are needed and they're asking the department to establish this and the department is still working on pilot programs and developing more layers of people when what we need to be doing is to deal with some of those cases where we already know what the problem is. But I would move on, if you don't mind.

MS. FERGUSON: Sure, I'm fine with that.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: One more question.

MR. PREYRA: One more question. The program for men, especially in downtown Halifax, and I'm sure you saw the news reports in the winter on homeless men being turned out on the street, minus 28, minus 30 - they had nowhere to go because that is part of the general policy at these shelters. Is the Department of Community Services planning on doing anything about providing support for homeless men during the day, places where they can stay warm, places where they can pursue some activities, places where they can even receive phone calls from potential employers? Essentially we throw them out on the street and let them fend for themselves when really, again this is another example, if we had them during the day, we could address their needs much more directly and much more sort of strategically, you know, over the long haul.

MS. FERGUSON: In terms of what happened last winter I think, as you'll know, we met with the shelters and there was funding provided depending on weather conditions so that the shelters could stay open during the day. We actually have a review going on right now with the shelters in metro and part of what we're looking at is exactly what the mandate of the shelter should be, what is the programming that's available, who are the clients that they're serving, what are the needs of those clients, and I forget exactly when we're hoping that review will be completed.

MR. DAVE RYAN: It's going to be in the summer.

MS. FERGUSON: So hopefully we'll have that review this summer but that is one of the areas that the review is looking at.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Trevor and then Keith.

MR. TREVOR ZINCK: Madam Chairman, I will reiterate the words of my colleague, thank you for coming here today even though it is Friday the 13th. It's nice to see staff here, experienced staff. I'm going to throw a couple of quick snappers at you, nothing too difficult in the first round. The last affordable housing agreement accountability report was released to the public in 2004. Why hasn't the department publicly released the required annual report since then?

MR. DAN TROKE: Actually there has been a report. We've done two reports to the public. The last one I think was released last summer and I would be happy to forward both of those on to you. Basically those cover some of the stories, some of the individuals who were involved. Of course, as you're aware, the big requirement of this agreement is to wrap everything up by March 2009 and at which point we'll be doing a larger broad-base report back to the public. We have been doing presentations as well to interested groups, kind of letting them know what we've been able to accomplish and kind of where things are. So there have been lots of opportunities to interact with the general public but I would be happy following this to make sure that both those reports are sent over to you.

MR. ZINCK: Okay, great, thank you.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Could I just interrupt. Perhaps those reports could be sent to the committee clerk and they could be distributed to everyone.

MR. TROKE: No problem.

MR. ZINCK: There hasn't been an accountability report from the Housing Development Corporation posted on the Web site yet to my knowledge. Is that going to be done soon?

MR. TROKE: The Housing Development Corporation, as you know, is largely a loan-granting body that is used to facilitate some larger construction projects, loans and so on. My understanding is if we want to look at, from a corporation perspective, the information with regard to the corporation, if it's not on the Web, I know that we do report information on a regular basis with regard to the corporation. What I can do as well is, I can talk to our financial services folks to ensure that the information with regard to the corporation's annual audit can be forwarded on to the committee as well.

MR. ZINCK: The last one and then I'll let it move on to some other people, during the Budget debates the minister had spoken quite extensively on the success of rent supplements. Can you just give us a brief overview of how an individual qualifies for a rent supplement and how it's basically rolled out as far as a program?

MR. TROKE: The rent supplement program, actually, there are two areas, first of all as part of the social housing agreement of 1997, we have about 700 to 800 rent supplements that exist and are administered through our housing authorities regionally.

Basically, it works the exact same way as it would work as if the landlord was one of our public housing officers or one of our public housing areas. What it is, an individual would apply and if their needs cannot be met within a certain community either because of a limited amount of affordable stock or if there are some specific challenges to that individual, again as the deputy mentioned, maybe some medical issues, then what we would look at doing is entering into an agreement with a private sector landlord, we would do an inspection of the unit to ensure, from a health and safety perspective, that it is a safe, suitable place for them to live and then effectively what happens is the individual would be responsible for paying 30 per cent of their gross household income for rent. Any amount that would be different between what the actual rent is and that 30 per cent would be paid through one of these rent supplements.

[9:30 a.m.]

The second area, and it's a similar model that exists within the Affordable Housing Program, is in our process of constructing new units or in our process of certain areas where there were some challenges in getting units constructed, we have entered into agreements as well with the private sector or even with non-profits, which are looking to drive down rents even further in specific cases. So we have been able to accommodate over 100 rent supplements through the Affordable Housing Program as well and we are continuing to look at that as a vehicle as we move forward into March 2009 for some of those cases where either the location specific they can't find what they need or because of distinct needs like medical. We certainly are looking at this as a vehicle and it has been a vehicle for a couple of decades in this province, to meet needs that maybe can't be fit exactly within the public housing stock.

MR. ZINCK: So if someone was to want to participate in that program, what would be their next move?

MR. TROKE: Contact their local housing authority and the housing authority would work with them from there to meet their needs.

MR. ZINCK: Great, thank you.

MR. TROKE: No problem.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Thank you. Keith.

MR. KEITH COLWELL: Yes, first of all I want to, again, as I said in this committee before to the deputy minister, I want to really thank the staff at the department for the excellent work they do in my community and the extra effort they put forward. So if you could pass it on to them, I would really appreciate it.

MS. FERGUSON: I would be very pleased to. Thank you so much for saying that.

MR. COLWELL: It is difficult situations we have lots of times, as I am sure all my colleagues do, and they are really up for the challenge and if there is anything they can do, they always do it.

I have a few questions to ask on this New Home Purchase Program. How does that work?

MR. TROKE: The New Home Purchase Program was established as part of the Affordable Housing Program in 2002. There were six units created in downtown Halifax. What essentially we are looking at here is individuals who have the capacity to achieve home ownership but also through capital contribution, through the Affordable Housing Program, were able to drive down the overall cost of that. Now there are requirements and long-term arrangements that are put in place around these units.

One of the challenges we have had with this, and we have been working with CMHC on this, is that there are some requirements around key locations as being used for this home ownership project. So we have done six of them here in Halifax. The requirement on it is, it is called an urban area revitalization. What that means is, in the process of developing the Affordable Housing Program, certain larger cities have real challenges with revitalizing their downtown core. So that was a condition that was put on it. So here in Nova Scotia, the only area that was able to qualify was the Gottingen Street area. So, as part of the Affordable Housing Program, we were able to develop some units there and obviously it is one of the things that, if there is a go forward with CMHC beyond March 2009, we certainly are looking at changing that requirement if we can.

MR. COLWELL: There is no way - for instance, in my area, I represent North Preston, and that is urban core, believe or not.

MR. TROKE: Oh, I agree.

MR. COLWELL: It is and there is a real housing problem. There is a tremendous housing problem. So there is no way, under that New Home Purchase Program that that could be included in that program?

MR. TROKE: No, it wouldn't. However, and I have had the great privilege of going out and meeting with some of the folks at WADE and as well the Preston Area Housing Authority. We have talked several times about different options around creating new rental opportunities, although not home ownership. It is certainly those communications that you just spoke of around some challenges and some desires of the community to put some affordable units in place. They have talked to us on regular occasions about that and we continue to work with them about any opportunities that might be there. Unfortunately, under this program, at this point, the home ownership options for affordable housing, it doesn't work under the descriptions that we have.

MR. COLWELL: That's unfortunate, especially in that area. Again, this is an issue that's always an issue - the funding cutoff limits, particularly for seniors where a couple is limited to \$20,500 and a senior couple \$22,000 over 65. Is there any hope at all of moving those upward? Today, with the cost of everything escalating so fast, a tank of oil now is over \$1,000, you are not long eating up \$20,000 just to survive, never mind doing any kind of repairs on your house, which is essential.

MR. TROKE: Yes, I guess the two pieces of information is that every year we talk with our partner, CMHC, around the household income limits and we look at the data, can it be adjusted upwards. Obviously we want to be able to help as many people as we can within those limits. So normally it would be the end of June/early July when they have the information that will allow us to look at that information. Any time that the information can be adjusted, we do bring that to executive and get those numbers moved.

The second part, though, is the Senior Citizens' Assistance Program. As you are aware, the limits were increased to \$22,000 for the one- and two-bedroom for rural Nova Scotia and small town, which allowed many more individuals to be eligible under the program. As the minister mentioned during estimates debate, we are looking at that program again, not only from an income level but we always look at the program from the perspective of what you can do and what are the needs of the individuals.

We've been closely associated with some of the senior study work that has been going on at Mount Saint Vincent and we've been utilizing that data and that information to inform us as to what the needs of seniors are, not just for today but the Mount Saint Vincent study looks out 20 years. So that kind of information is very helpful when we're trying to design, not just repair, but also adaptation programs because one of the biggest challenges amongst the senior population is that the house, from the perspective of safety and security, may be fine but as time goes on, the ability to be able to access and get in and out of their home is of critical importance for independent living.

So we also have adjusted our programs in areas of access-a-home and we also continue to look at the programs within the RRAP suite that allows seniors to access things like the Home Adaptation for Seniors' Independence and so on, to be able to kind of work these programs together to help them out between the health and safety and the mobility challenges that they have.

MR. COLWELL: The real fear I have and it's real, I believe, what we're seeing today is that so many seniors who were living a reasonable lifestyle - they weren't travelling to Florida every year or doing anything like that but they could look after themselves and do some minor repairs around their home and do some things that they enjoy - it's coming to a point now that they're not going to be able to do this, it's going to be simply impossible. All these homes are older, they're not insulated properly, the heating costs are right through the roof, and literally through the roof. We've really got to address this issue because if we don't address this issue, where are they going to go? It may be to the point that they're going to lose homes that they have no mortgages on.

The property taxes, which is another issue that has nothing to do with Community Services - well, it does because you have a program for that - but very low income seniors to help with that, the Guaranteed Income Supplement. Is there any chance of looking at that property assistance tax program further, to raise the limits on that, rather than the limit they use for the income supplement because property taxes in HRM are just out of line. I mean there's just no other way to put it, they're way too high and you've got a modest home now, you're faced with a minimum of \$1,200 to \$1,500 a year property taxes and that's a big chunk. You make \$20,500 a year, you've got \$19,000 left after you pay your property taxes. Then, a couple of tanks of oil and you've got \$15,000 left and it soon erodes.

MR. TROKE: I agree with your comments around seniors and their energy concerns. One of the things we have been able to do is partner with Conserve Nova Scotia. Two years ago, we were able to help 105 individuals to have EnerGuide tests done on their home at no cost to themselves and then the top items that were identified through that EnerGuide were done through the programs. So these were individuals who came to the department with health and safety concerns. We were able to do a repair on the home for them and then we were able to do EnerGuide and do some of the insulation and the weather stripping and things that are critical for them.

Last year we were able to help 200 homes through this same program and we're going to continue to work with Conserve Nova Scotia this year. It's a start, it's one of those kind of "let's do what we can do". The nice part about that by partnering with Conserve is that you can coordinate the efforts, rather than you have an individual with a contractor and another contractor and another contractor come through the door over the run of, say, a six-month period, you can coordinate some of your efforts together to help somebody have kind of the whole envelope of their house looked at. So that is a program that has had great success and we've had a lot of individuals who are interested in it and we're going to continue to move forward with those efforts.

I guess it's one of those things where it's an opportunity for government departments to work together that have similar mandates, when you have one client and they have similar mandates that we can work together to do both the health and safety and the energy concerns at the same time. So it is something that we've been able to do over the last three years and are looking forward to doing more into the future.

MS. FERGUSON: I just want to add, Dan, to what you said, that government did announce that in 2009-10 the amount of the property tax rebate will increase and that was announced in the last budget.

MR. COLWELL: Yes, I realize that but not enough. The property taxes in HRM have gone up astronomically, I mean it's not a little increase, it's huge. Their annual budget went from \$450 million a year income about four years ago to almost \$700 million. So that money is coming out of the pockets of the property owners.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Keith, can you just wrap up this round, one quick one, it has been 10 minutes and we'll come back.

MR. COLWELL: One quick one, this one, maybe not one you can do, I had that energy audit done on my home which I paid for, it only does half the job. It doesn't do the complete job. It was good, what was done, but it doesn't look at the equipment that when you think it's turned off, it isn't, didn't do an energy audit on the electrical equipment. It didn't give you enough detailed information.

For instance, the guy used a fan in the door - and anyone who hasn't had this done should have it done even though I'm saying it should be better - but they didn't have a little smoker, that little thing that looks like a thing that you can find out where the draft is coming from. They just sort of went around and felt it to see where it was. The report was detailed but not detailed enough and really, for me, it was excellent because I know what I've got to do now and I'm going to do it over time, but if you give this to a senior and give them a detailed list and say this is what you need done, what you need to do, you'll find that the senior will get someone to help them slowly do this over time or, hopefully, be able to get a grant to help. So I think that program has got to be improved. I know it's not Community Services but it does address, if you're putting money into a home based on a report, I think the report should be better and not that it's not good but it should be better.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Leo.

MR. LEO GLAVINE: Thank you very much, Madam Chairman, and thank you, deputy and staff, for coming in today and dealing with I think still one of the critical issues facing the province. I represent part of the Annapolis Valley and I'm not sure if the yardsticks to measure an improvement have in fact moved very far in the five years that I've been asking these questions.

I'm just wondering if you could reference, if you have this material at your disposal at the moment, the wait list in 2003 and the wait list today in the Spring of 2008. It really comes to bear with a situation I've faced just in the last couple of weeks where a company has come in from Ontario and will build 15 affordable houses in the Annapolis Valley. The problem is that acute and they're talking about very low-income families because they're going to be setting it up on a 40-year payment plan for these homes.

So I need those statistics but I personally believe and I'll be disappointed if, when the poverty reduction strategy start to release - and it's supposed to be coming pretty soon - four or five very, very concrete recommendations, and I think one of the first ones is going to be around increasing the number of affordable units to rent in this province. I'm wondering how you're going to deal with this challenge in terms of asking government for more and insisting on more because we have too many people with too high a percentage of their income going for housing so that many other basic needs that they have and trying to push a little bit further quality of life is becoming impossible.

MS. FERGUSON: Maybe I'll just speak briefly to the poverty direction piece and then Dan can talk to the statistical piece. You're correct, Mr. Glavine, on the poverty reduction committee - we're anticipating recommendations coming to government at the end of June and I know they are working on those recommendations. I don't want to preempt or prejudge what's going to be in those. I do know, though, that government is very committed to looking at those, obviously addressing those and determining what the plan will be in terms of moving those recommendations forward. I do know that there have been members on that committee with a housing background - Darcy Harvey from the Community Action on Homelessness sits on that committee. I can only anticipate that obviously this is an issue that will have had much discussion at that group. So we look forward to those recommendations and obviously we'll have some work to do once we receive them.

MR. TROKE: When we look at the western part of the province and when we talk about where the statistics would have been, say, 2002-03 versus today, I guess one of the things that has happened, and it's across the province, one of the first indicators that has dropped is when we look at individuals in the census who have acknowledged that they don't have - sorry, let's go the other way. Individuals who acknowledge that they have a major repair required on their home, it's one of the key indicators we look at. That number, in 2006, for the first time in a couple of decades, has dropped and it has gone below 10 per cent. Part of that is due to the fact that each year we are helping about 2,500 people across the province with their home repairs, and those are individuals who are in homes that, in many cases, they own outright but individuals who really, just from a maintenance perspective or from a capital perspective, can't get the furnace and the roof, and so on, repaired.

[9:45 a.m.]

So one of the things that I guess I can say is that consistently about 25 per cent of the budget - and it's based not on population but rather on need - does go to the western part of this province and those individuals, year after year, are able to receive help through our regional operations.

In 2002, when the Affordable Housing Program was moving forward, one of the things that was identified that the highest level of need was among the rental population in Nova Scotia. Almost 45 per cent of renters were in the situation you described, where they were paying more than 30 per cent of their total income in order to provide shelter. So we entered into the new rental component of affordable housing. Through that, in the western part of this province, we were able to do over 230 new rentals. So these are units that are out there between non-profit and private sector, in which we're ensuring that the rents are below what the average market rents are and through rent supplements, in some cases, driving them down significantly to the point of individuals who are really low income. We're talking about individuals who really have challenges making rental payments.

So we have been able to target that and we've had great success. We've had a lot of individuals in the Valley who have come forward and have been very interested in partnering with us and as some of the slides you saw earlier show, we have been able to do a number of 20- to 30-unit buildings to help individuals. These are mostly individuals who are coming off of our lists who have been identified as having challenges and we've been able to help them out that way. I think it has been a very successful tool.

I guess one of the things that we have also been able to do is almost 70 individuals in the western part of this province have been able to get home preservation, which are homes that required assistance even beyond what we could do in the RRAP suite. So these are individuals, typically families that have a home in a location where they have access to all the services and the things they need - and in many cases, their job - and we've been able to go in and help them out with more than \$16,000 worth of assistance. Of course, as you can appreciate, in rural Nova Scotia, one of the things that many times happens is a septic field fails and you're into \$15,000 or \$20,000 worth of repair work, and we've been able to help a lot of folks out through ourselves and our partners at Environment in order to be able to help those individuals stay where they are and to be able to ensure they are going to have a safe place to live for the next 15 to 20 years.

MR. GLAVINE: Thank you and there's no question that in the midst of this waiting list of probably somewhere between 500 to 600 people - because I know in March 2006, I think maybe the last statistic I had, it was over 500 - there is some good work being done, there's no question. When you see a family or a senior able to get the kind of help through this program that they otherwise could never have realized, it is a very good day. But in the western part of the province, because we know that was one of the very first highly-settled areas, we have an enormous amount of old housing stock that does need the current upgrade to meet even basic code standards, let alone - as my colleague talked about - the insulation requirements and a period of very, very costly heating bills.

I'm wondering, are there any parts of the province targeted with trying to increase that level of home restoration? Again, the western area of the province, as well, demographically does have the highest percentage of elderly people. Therefore, keeping them in their home can also resolve another issue when we know that long-term care, and so forth, is at a premium.

MR. TROKE: The way in which our programs work is we actually look at three factors. The first factor is the affordability issue; second, we look at the state of repair that's required so that you have a safe place for an individual to live; and then third, we look at what's called the suitability factor, where if you have a family, the size of house that would be needed to be able to house them - it could be an apartment, it could be a home.

So all of our programs take that information and it's provided to us through Statistics Canada data, in combination with CMHC, that basically breaks our province up into four areas. Those four areas, that percentage, is the percentage in which the funding that's available is distributed for our repair programs. I guess one of the things, when you

look at it, it's almost 25 per cent for each region - it deviates by 1 or 2 per cent - and what it does is even though you may have a smaller population, let's say in the western area or even in Cape Breton, it does take into account the fact that you do have some older stock, you do have individuals who perhaps have suitability needs - maybe the units aren't the right size or whatever.

As a result, even though certain parts of the province from a population perspective may be much larger, it takes all of those into consideration and it works out to about 25 per cent of each budget goes into the province in that manner. What that allows us to do is to go into some of the areas that have older stock or have challenges with regard to seniors accessing their home, we're able to supply funding to help those 500 or 600 applications that come in during the run of the year and help them within that year to be able to stay where they are and to do the things they need to be safe.

MR. GLAVINE: Do I have time for . . .

MADAM CHAIRMAN: One quick one.

MR. GLAVINE: First of all, I hope you will be able to provide those statistics for the entire committee, that would be great. What's the explanation that you receive relating to this question - I'm sure it's one you often get - why does this province count child tax credits as income and disqualify many more Nova Scotians from home repair subsidies? I feel that's a real true limitation, especially with three or even four children and very modest incomes - again, I'm in a part of the province where farm labour salaries are extremely low.

MR. TROKE: The programs we offer, both in partnership with CMHC and the provincial programs, the definition we use for income, or the ability of a house to use its funds to either provide rent or do the necessary repair, looks at gross household income - we don't exclude any type of income and the rationale behind it. We have heard the comments that you make here today and I guess what we look at is the ability regardless of source to say one source of income versus another source of income, regardless of where it comes from, is something that should or shouldn't be used for shelter, or should or shouldn't be used in order to accommodate a repair.

Basically, what this program does, it says regardless of what you do, regardless of how you get your income or regardless of where that comes from, income is all treated consistently the same. As a result, when you look at any home, regardless of the size, it's whatever income that total household can bring in order to be able to ensure that there's a roof over their head and that it's a safe place to live. I guess this is a definition that has been used for quite a period of time and it is something that is spelled out, both within the social housing agreement and within the RRAP suite of programs, which we partner with CMHC. It's something that is used in order to try to be as consistent and fair as possible across the province.

MS. FERGUSON: I just might add to what Dan said, that this is something that's used across Canada in terms of the social housing agreement with CMHC, so it's consistent across the country. We certainly have heard your concerns before, but this is a formula that's applied across the country.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Richard.

HON. RICHARD HURLBURT: Thank you, Madam Chairman. Thank you, deputy and staff, for coming in today. I appreciate getting the overview of housing in the province. I think you're doing a tremendous job with the funds that you have and you're touching every part of our province. We have less than one million people in the province - geographically it's a big province, so you have a lot of work on your hands.

I would like to comment, though, on a couple of issues that you raised here this morning, and that's partnering with other departments. You were talking about the Department of Health - and I think, deputy, you and I have had this conversation on numerous occasions - and partnering with Conserve Nova Scotia. I believe that we have reached out and helped over 500 homeowners in the province with Conserve Nova Scotia. This year it will be over 500 homes. Am I right, Dan?

MR. TROKE: I don't know the number for this year, but I know that collectively the two departments working together has helped well over 500 people.

MR. HURLBURT: Yes and I think we had to expand on those programs more with other government departments and I think Nova Scotians are getting the benefit from it.

I would like to, you know, you said 70 per cent of your budget is for the western region. Is that what you said in the affordable housing?

MR. TROKE: No, 25 per cent.

MR. HURLBURT: Oh, 25 per cent. But the western region goes from the Halifax County line in Hants, right all the way around to the Halifax line in - is it Hubbards?

MR. TROKE: Yes, I believe that's correct.

MR. HURLBURT: Where are the boundaries?

MR. TROKE: You're right, you're correct.

MR. HURLBURT: So it's a big area.

MR. TROKE: Absolutely.

MR. HURLBURT: Yes, and there are needs, absolutely, but we are working on that and the budget has grown, has it not?

MR. TROKE: Correct.

MR. HURLBURT: I also want to say, I thank your department very much for the four units in beautiful downtown Yarmouth. (Interruption) Absolutely, you should drive down to see it. It's a good part of the province.

MR. ZINCK: I was down last week. You weren't home. (Laughter)

MR. HURLBURT: And there's a reason for everything.

I would like to get a little more information on the mortgages and loans for seniors, i.e., there's a senior in my community and their home, in my opinion - and I'm going to have it investigated more - I think is unfit for a person to be in. What criteria do they have to go through to get assistance for a mortgage, a capital loan to help them replace their home?

MR. TROKE: Really, first of all, if you have a senior and you have concerns or they have concerns with regard to their home and the health and safety in that, first encourage them to talk to our folks in the Middleton office or down in Bridgewater, because they're really great people and they really go the extra mile to make sure that folks are aware of what we do and how we do it.

Basically, with regard to assistance, we have about 13 programs and included within that suite of programs are mortgages as well as small loans, depending upon if you have individuals who are above those household income limits that we use for the repair programs. We do have an ability to offer some low income assistance to individuals, and typically what would happen is an individual would apply, we would look at their income and their home ownership status. We would send an inspector down to take a look at the house and find out what the health and safety issues are and, if eligible, then the next step would be to get those individuals to get quotes to get the work done on their home.

That could be including, depending upon the state of the home, if you had an individual whose home was beyond repair, we would offer them alternative accommodation options, whether it would be public housing or perhaps one of our affordable housing units, but we would also work with them if maintaining home ownership was the right thing for them and that's what they wanted to do. We would then explore perhaps either a mortgage or a loan option for them to either fix what they have or perhaps even to find alternative accommodations.

So within that suite, there are many, many options for individuals, but the first step for them is to touch base with the Middleton office and if you have a specific case - and that's one of the things that is great about many of our staff, they already know many of

these individuals first-hand, which means that when an individual comes to talk to them about a circumstance, they already know, in many cases, the circumstances and what they might or might not be able to do. Those individuals, once they apply, can have a good, long discussion with the individuals in those offices.

MR. HURLBURT: Is there a maximum that they're allowed to have for a mortgage for an individual on a home?

MR. TROKE: Under the Family Modest Housing Program, the maximum is \$70,000. Now, what often happens in that situation is the program was designed so that things like sweat equity - so if you had it and if you think about it in the description of the Family Modest Housing Program, many times that program, when individuals would access it, they would have a piece of land, perhaps even they had some access to some trades or some services through their family or whatever. So over time, many individuals were able to build home ownership, both in combination with a mortgage but also through the work they were able to bring. So over time, that's the way in which that program has typically worked.

When you have a situation where you have a senior who is looking to perhaps purchase a home or, in many cases, if they're in a home, what we would often do first is look at the suite of repair programs we have to see if we can repair that home, so it would be a safe place for them to live for a couple of decades to come. So often that means that looking at a thing like RRAP and saying, here's what we have to do from a structural perspective, and then looking at perhaps something like Access-A-Home, they might say, you know, if a ramp was needed to get in or if the bathroom needed to be moved down to the main level, we can look at how we can work those programs to help individuals out. As you're aware, hundreds of seniors each year, we go in and do that kind of work, to be able to help them stay in their homes.

[10:00 a.m.]

MR. HURLBURT: So you're telling me I should - these individuals, these seniors should contact the Middleton office and get an assessment done on the property?

MR. TROKE: You got it.

MR. HURLBURT: Okay, I thank you for that and I would like to say, deputy, I would appreciate you expanding more with the other deputies and other departments, to keep expanding the program. I think it's a program that is good for Nova Scotians and we have to work harder at it with other departments. Thank you.

MS. FERGUSON: Thank you very much, Mr. Minister.

MR. DAVE RYAN: Just in addition to that, this last fiscal year we helped 1,500 seniors in Nova Scotia with home repairs and that's 450 more than the previous year. Part

of that was that we received \$4 million extra from Health, targeted for seniors, and Health asked our department to deliver that program because we have that front-line service delivery. What we also did is, we put four more positions out there - one per region - to be able to assist in delivering those, because of the wait list and the ability for our staff to get out and deal with these applications and process them. So we have four new staff this year to help with the wait lists and we have an additional \$3.5 million from the Department of Health this year to continue that program.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Pat.

MR. PATRICK DUNN: Thank you, Madam Chairman, and thank you, deputy and staff, for being available and for your overview and for all the work that you're doing on a daily basis. The first question I have is dealing with affordable rental housing and it's dealing with - do you have any information with regard to Lone Parent Student Affordable Rental Housing at this stage of the game, supply and demand, how many units we may have, basically what's happening in the province with regard to that?

MR. TROKE: The lone parent program, which was designed within the Affordable Housing Program, originally we had 15 spots that were made available and all 15 were used up relatively quickly. We made another 15 available and in total, out of those 30, 27 individuals with 35 children were able to take advantage of that program.

As part of the go-forward, the commitment is that we would review that program, see our successes, see what we were able to do with this program and was it something that we would want to incorporate into our regular suite of programs going forward. We've done that review and there have been lots of positive comments around that. I believe the minister will be making comments around that in a short while.

MR. DUNN: The concentration of these units, are they in one particular area or are they spread out?

MR. TROKE: They were spread out. This was utilized by many universities that knew of individuals. The great part about this is that we've had some universities come forward and provide credits at book stores for these individuals, over and above the housing issue. We've had different services that have been made available.

The universities really recognized that there's an opportunity here to not only just influence an individual's life, but you're influencing an entire family's life by helping them out with their affordability challenges and going to university. So one of the things that we've been able to do in collecting information on this is finding out, as well, what are some of the other things that - we just talked a minute ago about partnering - we can do when partnering with the universities to also have them bring some benefits to these individuals.

So, they have been spread out. We've had them from Cape Breton to Halifax, to the Valley, and we also had individuals in Antigonish and so on, participate in this program. I guess the other big benefit that we've been able to discover from this is that many individuals are already in the place from an accommodation perspective of where they want to be and where they need to be, they just had an affordability challenge. This program actually allowed us to work with their landlord to actually stay exactly where they were. They didn't have to deal with maybe finding another daycare or perhaps even dealing with more transportation issues around getting family members to help them out.

So the difference, I guess here, is that individuals sometimes already had the right spot but this program allowed us to go in and make sure it was an affordable spot for them to be in. I think it's been a subtle difference that we've learned that this kind of a rent supplement, if you will, allows individuals to be exactly where they need to be not just from a university perspective, but also from their life and being able to accommodate their children in schools and all those things that are associated with it.

MR. DUNN: Has there been an increased demand for community college students with regard to . . .

MR. TROKE: At this point, the statistics that we had, most of the interest has come through the university level, that is certainly something that we had explored. We talked to many different individuals in the community college system. One of the things that we were discovering, particularly here in metro, that the community college system already had been accessing some of our services through our regional housing authority. So they were actually achieving some of their affordable housing challenges through the housing authority but also through the Affordable Housing Program. As new units were becoming available, because of the location and proximity to some of the community college activities, they were able to access some of these units. But it is one of those things that as part of our looking forward, we are looking at how we would not only use this for a university setting, but could it be something that would also utilize for a community college or a trades perspective in going forward as well.

MR. DUNN: Thank you. Perhaps just one last question. Often in the constituency office we have the question that the government has to reduce the guidelines and the red tape, if something can be consistently here. Are there any measures occurring where this may be taking place in your department?

MS. FERGUSON: In terms of the housing piece, we spoke earlier, we've been doing some work in terms of our wait list management process to make sure that that works as easily for people as it can, that people are informed, that the process is transparent, that it's easy to understand, and that everybody appreciates where they are on the wait list and understands how the wait list is managed. So that's one.

I would say as an overall view, as we develop programs and as we were able to do things through affordable housing, we always look at things in the department through a

client service lens and, obviously, that client service lens would be how can we best deliver services to the clients. Talking about the comments Minister Hurlburt made about working better with departments, we try to do that, not just in terms of the services that we do in our department, but also in terms of services that we provide as a government to people, because we know that a number of us in various departments provide services to the same clients.

So every time we have an opportunity, whether it's a new program, whether it's a revision to existing programs, we're always looking to ensure that we're delivering those programs as easily as we can from the clients' perspective. We know that we still have some work to do but I can assure you that that's the utmost focus in terms of how we go forward, and I think the Social Prosperity Framework that government has been working with lately and was announced within the past year, really is a directive to all of us in government to ensure that we're providing services as cohesively as we can as a government. So that's a goal that we'll continue to strive to work toward.

MR. RYAN: If I could add to that, in addition, we've sent staff out to review the process we use for taking applications in for housing grants across the province and we're modelling like what's going on in eastern and in western, and mapping those out, developing process maps with the idea to look at the duplications where the best practices are and to streamline that, including the application form, and making it clearer for our clients. We hope to have that ready for the Fall, and that will dovetail nicely with the four new FTEs that are out there and delivering the grants.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Thank you. Perhaps I could ask the vice-chairman to take over the Chair.

[10:09 a.m. Mr. Keith Colwell took the Chair.]

MR. CHAIRMAN: Ms. More.

MS. MARILYN MORE: Thank you. This is a topic near and dear to my heart, because I think the lack of affordable housing is really driving the poverty cycle in Nova Scotia, but particularly in the metro area. I have to say, my constituency has some of the best and the worst of the situations. I have to give credit to the voluntary sector. I think some of the best examples of affordable housing in my area of Dartmouth are being driven by the voluntary sector. We have second-stage housing with Alice Housing, women and children fleeing domestic abuse. We now have Holly House, where a number of women who are at risk of homelessness are living as a result of efforts by the Elizabeth Fry Society. We have wonderful new supportive housing for young mothers operating with actual in-house supports and daily programs that is phenomenal and is going to make a huge, huge difference in the lives of those young moms and their children. We have the Dartmouth Non-Profit Housing Society that's been operating in Dartmouth for probably 25 years.

Unfortunately, some of those groups are running into problems, two of them have actually started to sell off some of their housing stock in order to maintain the rest of their buildings. So I'm wondering why there aren't more supports and more money provided to the voluntary sector organizations dealing with mental health consumers and others who are desperately trying to put up some of these transitional housing initiatives that will make such a difference and actually turn people's lives around?

MR. TROKE: I guess, first of all, I would concur with your comments around the groups that you mentioned in your area. We've been involved with all those groups in different capacities over time, both from a support, financially, in some cases, and in some cases, working with their boards and groups in order to be able to address some challenges.

With regard to groups making decisions to either purchase units or sell units, many times they have boards that look at the overall picture and how they can deliver what they deliver. Those are independent arms, those are groups in the community who are making decisions as to what they want to do and how they want to do it. Some groups make those decisions over time with kind of a longer-term plan that a short-term adjustment is part of what they want to accomplish over time.

One of the things that we have done through the Affordable Housing Program is, about 25 per cent of the units that we've created have been with non-profits. So these are groups who responded to our request for proposals, put in submissions, mobilized individuals in their communities to either come up with assets and plans and so on and very resourceful people. I guess one of the things, and you referenced SHYM - we were actively involved with SHYM, and it's a great project. We have been involved with Dartmouth Non-Profit for about two decades and, in fact, when they ran into some challenges over time, we were able to work with them. In fact, just last year, they presented our minister with a cheque repaying her for some of the assistance they received.

So these boards are very, very resourceful and very good at what they do, and I agree 100 per cent with your comments. I guess one of the things that we saw is, when we rolled the Affordable Housing Program out, many of these groups for some period of time who had plans of either starting a project or expanding a project, were able to come to us and, over the run of a couple of years, we were able to work with them and get past some of the resource issues, and we've been able to, for them, get new units on the ground.

So, the other thing that's been really neat, is that the non-profit sector has also recognized - we discussed earlier the Rent Supplement Program, many of the non-profits who don't have a capacity to be landlords have individuals in their community they actively work with, help, and so they have been able to partner with the private sector and us in order to be able to provide individuals units while they're providing different services.

So there were all kinds of ways within that envelope to be able to help individuals out. I won't deny that, you know, some of the non-profits have some real capacity issues because, as you mentioned, you've got some individuals on a voluntary basis in many cases

trying to move ahead with a project or a plan but there are ways for them to do it. There have been some real success stories and, you know, we continue to look for opportunities to partner both through the Affordable Housing Program, but we also do work with many of these groups that have units through the Social Housing Agreement.

We have ongoing monetary assistance that we supply with them and when they run into challenges around units, whether it's adding stock, or in some cases a decision maybe they may make to remove stock, we work with them to devise, not just a short-term plan, but a longer-term plan on how this works with their goals and trying to achieve. So we don't just come from a financial perspective. We also try to help them from a resource perspective around business planning, maybe even working with banks or with financial institutions to work through some of their problems, and we've been able to develop many, many partnerships and the Affordable Housing Program has worked quite well for them as well.

MS. MORE: Well, what I'm hearing from that sector though is that they need more support with core funding so they don't have to make these very difficult decisions, but they also need support to provide the in-house services that a lot of their clients need. I, too, wanted to talk about the need for 24-hour transitional housing, or shelter support, and a roof over their head.

I had one situation where a developmentally delayed young teen with severe behaviour problems had been transferred to a youth shelter, which literally put her out on the street for several hours a day. This was a young woman whom the family felt could not look after herself and was also a threat to other people in the community. We need some sort of transitional housing support with services for troubled youth or youth with disabilities. These are the very people that, you know - it's just going to get worse and worse and we're going to have to deal with it one way or another. So I think it would be very cost-effective to put the intervention up front instead of dealing with the results down the road.

Every day people come into my office who cannot afford a roof over their head. The shelter allowance, they're already taking money out of their food and their clothing and whatnot to pay the exorbitant rents for what they get in the metro area. You know, what can we do to provide suitable housing for people who are between a rock and a hard place? The shelter allowances are too low, the rents are too high, and there's a huge lack of affordable housing. What is the wait list, for example, for the housing authority in the metro area? You mentioned something like 4,000 across the province. What is it, specifically, in HRM?

MR. TROKE: I don't have the exact number of the wait list in HRM. The list is higher in HRM than in other places because of the size of the population that we have here. I don't have the exact number in front of me but it is over 1,000.

MS. MORE: Over 1,000?

MR. TROKE: Yes.

MS MORE: So what would you suggest MLAs tell people who can't afford a roof over their head?

MR. RYAN: Well, one of the things that we're doing from an income assistance perspective is we've encouraged the tenants who are potential tenants to contact their local offices of Community Services and that way we can usually sort of point them in the direction of income assistance, we will point them in the direction of housing or so on, and assess the needs on an individual basis. We have shelter rates, you know, that seem to be able to provide housing for income assistance clients in metro. We're reviewing that. We expect things to come out of the Poverty Strategy as well. So our department is constantly evaluating the whole shelter component within income assistance. We've also increased shelter rates in 2005 and 2006 and we've increased the personal allowance this year as well.

AN UNIDENTIFIED GUEST: Four dollars.

MS. MORE: Well, it's a pitiful increase . . .

MR. VICE-CHAIRMAN: Order, please. Unfortunately, you can't make any comments from the audience. Thank you.

MS. MORE: Unfortunately, it is driving, especially single men and women under 55, into rat-infested, bedbug infested rooming houses. There just aren't any options. Otherwise, they couch surf with friends and family or they become homeless and have to enter the shelter system. We can do better and I think metro is the worst case example because of the high rents. So we have to do more and do it more quickly. We are losing people every single day to homelessness.

MS. FERGUSON: I would just say, as Dave highlighted, we have been able to increase IA rates over the past five years. We have been able to increase shelter rates. It is our hope that we will hear some constructive results over the poverty reduction committee because obviously what you are speaking to is poverty. The poverty issue is more complex, unfortunately, than IA rates. While I recognize that they are a significant piece of this, I think there are a number of pieces to this that we have to look at across government, which is why the strategy will come at it from a couple of perspectives, which is my hope, in terms of Health, Health Promotion and Protection, Education, and Community Services. There are a number of pieces that we need to look at and it is our hope that the recommendations that come forward from this group will help us look at it and address the root causes of poverty, as we should, and look at them holistically and together. So that would be our hope.

MS. MORE: Well, I agree with you in the middle- and long-term approach but there are people today who are suffering and I don't think we can use that committee and its

recommendations and future action as an excuse not to take action now for the critical number of people who are facing crisis now. Certainly, any increases in income assistance and shelter allowance have been eaten up by the cost of living increases in Canada. So those people are actually further behind than they may have been even five years ago.

So I would like to finish with one question. Do you have any idea how much money the provincial budget put into housing five years ago and how much of it is going into it now? I am not talking about the federal money, I would like to know just what the difference is in funding from the provincial budget over the last five years.

MR. TROKE: The provincial budget, when you look at total social housing stock and you mention not the federal contribution but the way that the social housing agreement was designed was that 75 per cent of the losses associated with offering low-income housing would be absorbed by the federal government; 12.5 per cent by the province and 12.5 per cent by the municipalities. That was the cost-sharing formula. So you take your gross cost of doing business, less your rents and then what is left over, that is the cost-sharing formula that was designed. That formula still exists today. So the provincial contribution to that is still 12.5 per cent. Now what has actually happened is the provincial share has climbed because the federal share is frozen in 1994-95 dollars. So that 12.5 per cent has crept up to be more like 14 per cent or 15 per cent of the total cost and every year that we move forward to 2032, when all the mortgages associated with social housing are gone, the provincial contribution will continue to climb. So that is the way that it was designed.

In absolute dollar amounts, I don't know the number but I know that from a formula perspective it went from 12.5 per cent, we are closer to 14 per cent or 15 per cent now and that number will continue to grow over a period of time.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Mr. Glavine.

[10:23 a.m. Ms. Marilyn More resumed the Chair.]

MR. GLAVINE: Mr. Chairman, I first wanted to make a comment and pick up on at least one of my colleagues today in talking about the household limits being restrictive. When we look at seniors, in particular, where for a senior couple over 65, the limit is \$22,000 and a senior over 65, the limit is \$19,000. I look at the Annapolis Valley, which is a microcosm of where the whole province is going to go - three communities in the Annapolis Valley have 25 per cent of their population over 65. Five communities have 20 per cent of their population over 65. Many of those seniors are unable to do some of their own work and repair on their homes. I think this is a needed area, and I hadn't come to the committee meeting today - but I think this committee, in one way or another here today, either by a resolution, ask of the deputy to convey to government the need to get that limit up higher. Otherwise, once again we don't have the plan in place to meet an extremely growing demand and the crux and crunch is going to come where many, many more homes,

just as the minister alluded to, will be unsuitable for any kind of living accommodation. They're going to have deteriorated to that point.

One senior called me this week where back two years ago, she had put in a request because a door and two or three windows - the actual frames were rotting. When they finally got around to coming out and doing an assessment, she needs a new roof. Well, yes, we planned to give you around \$3,000 to \$3,500. Well, you know, three windows, a door and a new roof is out of the question, based on the amount that they targeted that she would receive initially.

This is going to escalate in this area. I know the housing in my riding, I've been at almost every home. I'm giving you a picture of how we're going to reach a true crisis with the older housing stock, especially if we can't get these limits up a little higher, so that timely repairs can be made.

MS. FERGUSON: I agree with you, in terms of what you said, in terms of the housing stock, in terms of the demographic shift, where we're going to be in a number of years with seniors in Nova Scotia.

We were able to increase the rates in 2007; it's something that Minister Streach also feels very strongly about. She has asked me to work with Dan and Dave and their staff to look at some options. So we're hopeful in the next month or so that we're going to be able to have some options that we can discuss with her and look at maybe some opportunities that we may have to move this forward, recognizing that we have to think much farther down the road in the department, in terms of what the pressures are going to be in 20 years and know what we need to start doing today, so we can address those and we can be preventative in our approach, as opposed to always having to be reactive.

So we are starting to look at that and we hope to have some options for the minister to review in the next little while.

MR. GLAVINE: Thank you, deputy. I'll be watching closely on that one.

MR. TROKE: If I could just add one more little thing. For the individual that you mentioned, when an inspector goes to the home that they are called out for, we don't go out with a limit in mind. In fact, the limit, as the deputy mentioned, went from \$3,500 to \$5,000 on the seniors' program. But what happens, when we go to their home and we find these additional things that might not have been noticed by the individual but became apparent to the inspector as causing the problem, we would then essentially slide that individual from a program that would offer \$5,000 towards the RRAP program.

What that would mean is that there would be a \$16,000 limit that would be available on that home and therefore, if a roof and a casing or perhaps even a portion of a wall, because of leakage, needed to be replaced, we would do it under that umbrella. If you have an individual who, for whatever reason, feels that there was some kind of a limit placed on

it, I would also encourage you to let that individual know that they can come back and talk to staff and we'd be happy to re-evaluate the situation to find out if there was some misunderstanding with regard to what that individual may or may not have understood.

MR. GLAVINE: Thank you very much. In terms of the off-reserve, the business plan 2008-09 showed a target to commit all of the off-reserve original trust funds of \$7.8 million. But now in 2006-07, no funds were committed. Why was that the case?

MR. TROKE: Part of the process, and as the deputy mentioned in her opening remarks, is that we did a consultation, we talked to the off-reserve delivery groups and talked to them about what are the challenges and the things that they see as most important, from a low-income perspective. We had meetings with those groups to identify a list of options, which ranged from home ownership to new rentals, even ongoing shelter or service needs that they may have. Within that, we identified several groups that were interested in actively delivering this program.

So what you'll find is that those groups sat down with us, created a list, created mechanisms for delivering and then we entered into agreements with these groups to deliver on our behalf. In fact, the Native Council of Nova Scotia delivers a portion of our RRAP suite for us to this community already. They identified, along with others, they were interested in participating in this.

So, last year, through the native council, through native women and the other delivery groups that were involved, we were able to deliver about \$900,000 to \$1 million worth of this fund, with the bulk of it actually going out the door this summer. One of the things that became very apparent and about \$3 million of this fund, the group earmarked towards low income home ownership.

What they saw as one of the key things is, that due to family size and due to some of the issues they had, low-income working individuals needed to find more suitable accommodation and needed to have a chance to own their own home. We entered into an agreement and native council is delivering this right now. I know they have some - 12 or 13 families who are out there right now working to purchase their first home. More of that work's going to continue right through into the Fall.

[10:30 a.m.]

MR. GLAVINE: Thank you, that answered the next part that I had which was what happened in 2007-08 and currently.

MADAM CHAIR: I'm sorry. I think in order for everyone to have a chance at the second round, we're going to have to cut a little shorter. Thank you. Trevor.

MR. ZINCK: Maybe we could ask you to stay an extra hour. (Laughter) I want to go back to shelter allowances. Dave, I appreciate your comments and the deputy's with

regard to the increases over the last number of years. An alarming message was sent out to the media the other day by the Minister of Health regarding the increasing health budget and the potential - I believe he said in 2025 - to have pretty much every government program losing complete funding due to the rising cost of health care. Where that comes in relation to shelter allowance - I know we're doing a lot of good things, the seniors' grants have been fantastic, I've been able to help people in my community, through the department, which we really appreciate.

But, in metro, where we have a lot of individuals on social assistance, a lot of individuals living in apartments, there's just no denying it. I don't think there was an increase in the shelter in 2006. What we're looking at here, particularly, in around metro, specifically with a lot of clients I deal with because 60 per cent of my community do not have home ownership, they live in apartment buildings. A lot of these apartment buildings are 30, 40, 50 years old and I really think we're at a crisis point. I am not looking forward to next year, in January, if there is actually an increase in the power rate. I'm not looking forward to the next number of months getting calls from constituents who are experiencing the high electricity bills now due to the 8 per cent tax going back on electricity. These buildings have drafty windows, leaky patio doors, they do not have energy efficient appliances and their power bills are going to go up.

When we look at the shelter allowance, and a large number of people - even the seniors on fixed incomes who are living in some of these buildings, I have one seniors' facility in my community. When I have a senior coming to me who says they can no longer afford my \$600 TransGlobe one-bedroom apartment or the power bills, I have no place to send them. I have a waiting list and the health of that individual would be my next concern.

So, the minister is exactly right. We have a crisis. But, the shelter allowances are completely, completely inadequate. I know, I've said in the past to the minister, this is something that we can address right away. We didn't need the consultations in November to tell us this one key component - we've been hearing it from organizations over the last number of years. My concern is that we are going to be at a crisis, I can guarantee you, in my community next January if the Nova Scotia Power does receive that increase.

An individual on disability, as we know, single person, is getting \$535. Rents, I'm telling you, even in the worst parts of my community are \$575 to \$600. It's not safe in those areas, the buildings are not in great condition, so when they're done - and we're talking about paying more than 30 per cent of their income if they're a social assistance recipient or even on a pension. The health component of this is that we're asking literally to live and eat off of less than \$100 by the time they pay all the bills. That's a huge crisis.

We have a large number of people who are suffering from mental illness who are subsidized by Community Services and if we don't provide them adequate shelter to live in a decent part of the community, that issue with their health is going to continue. So I'm really hoping that that's one of the key components that comes out of this Poverty Reduction Strategy, and I believe it will be, but I also believe that it's something that we

could have addressed this year. The minister said when I raised it in the House and during the Budget Debates, and we've heard this in the past - well, if we give a shelter allowance, the landlords will take it. Well, we've played a role in that, because we've taken out the appeal process for rental increases for apartment dwellers in the Residential Tenancies Act. Perhaps we should look at putting that back in and making sure that the landlord can't take that money, that they have to have a legitimate reason. We know the rising cost of fuel, that's always the excuse, but I'm telling you right now, Killam Properties and TransGlobe are raising their rents \$50 a year.

We're going to have a crisis here next year in a community such as mine where 60 per cent of the people live in apartment buildings, older stock, and a lack of housing or affordable housing - and that is a difficult term, as we know, based on incomes, we're going to have a crisis. I'm concerned. I deal with enough cases as it is on a daily basis, but I'm waiting for this report.

The last thing I'll touch on, the \$4, the 80 per cent goes back on electricity, Dave. That equated at the time to \$8 to \$15 a month. We're raising the personal allowance probably \$4 to \$6 again in October. That doesn't pay for the power, and we know the personal allowance is being spent on housing to live in a decent place. So that doesn't even affect. The other thing I would suggest - and I mentioned it to the minister - in March 2009 this ends, the housing trust, the monies coming from the feds. What are we doing as a province, as a government, leadership in your department, in relation to, as we know housing issues all across this country, what are we doing as a province to work with the federal government in encouraging them to the pressures that we have, that we're going to experience, what role have you been taking in relation to working with the federal government?

MS. FERGUSON: I can speak to that, thank you. The province has been taking an active role with our provincial and territorial colleagues recognizing the March 2009 deadline. The chairman of this current committee is the minister from Newfoundland and Labrador, and our minister has been working with them in terms of having meetings with the federal government bringing these issues to their attention. I believe there will be another provincial-territorial meeting coming up in October raising these issues with our federal colleagues. So all of the provincial and territorial ministers of housing have been very active in terms of liaising with the federal government and putting their case forward. Minister Streach, personally, has been very effective in terms of putting Nova Scotia's position in terms of what this means for Nova Scotia. So it's a significant issue, and we're addressing it through that particular forum.

MADAM CHAIR: Leonard.

MR. PREYRA: Thank you very much, Madam Chair. I would like to come back to an earlier point that I was trying to make and I think you did respond to it, but I want to reiterate it, and that relates to the need for a 24/7 service, especially for youth at risk and street-involved youth. To me, it seems that the litmus test of Nunn, the litmus test of the

government's response to Nunn, the litmus test of the Child and Youth Strategy is whether or not they can make this happen at this point in time, because what's happening at the moment is that we have youth with mental health issues, we have youth with substance issues, we have youth with issues of violence, but essentially we put them out on the street during the day and if the various government departments cannot coordinate to say we're going to provide mental health services, we're going to provide community services, we're going to provide housing, then we are, in fact, inviting disaster, and we've learned nothing from Nunn.

So I understand that there are pilot projects and navigators being established, but it has been a number of years now since the Archie Billard case, and we do need to look at that issue seriously, and it is a test of the ability of the Child and Youth Strategy to work on those programs. It's just a comment, because I wanted to follow up on that.

I had a question about seniors' housing. The social workers in my constituency are just wonderful. They're doing a great job. They're very stretched, because they have a number of seniors' homes that they're working with and I really think they're doing a fabulous job, but I had a question about building managers and custodians. I had asked the minister whether or not a conscious decision had been made to not appoint building managers and custodians in seniors' buildings and the minister said, no.

But, I met with the regional manager - I don't know if that's his title - and asked him specifically about Joe Howe Manor, a very large building in my constituency, and I said, you haven't hired this building manager now in a number of years, you haven't a custodian there and last week I got a call from a senior saying that an ambulance had to wait for 20 minutes because they couldn't get into the building and they couldn't get into this apartment. He said a decision had been made not to hire a custodian or building manager in that building. In fact, the department, at that point, had made a decision to just hire security guards after hours - I should say, relatively untrained security guards.

It seems to me that seniors are a population that really do need to have someone in-house who can respond to their needs. I'm not talking about health needs, I'm talking about basic services. I'm wondering if you can clarify what seems to be a discrepancy in what the department is saying about building managers and custodians and what front line people are actually doing, because these positions have not been filled for a very long time, and I think it is something that has to be addressed.

MS. FERGUSON: I agree with you. I'm not aware of that particular situation, but I am prepared to look into that specific situation and get back to you. I do know that we've done a survey in all of our seniors' building in terms of levels of security, what we provide now, what's going on in our existing buildings and looking at doing some recommendations. As part of our ongoing plan, in terms of equipping buildings for seniors, in terms of having an Aging in Place strategy, there definitely is a piece exactly for all the reasons you mentioned in order to respond to seniors.

I apologize, I'm not aware of that specific situation, but I will get back to you. Again, in terms of what we talked about before, we know we need to prepare for the future as well in terms of what the demographics are going to look like. We need to be able to do the best we can to respond to the needs of seniors. I would agree with you in terms of that sense of security and well-being in their building. That's something that we need to look at. Again, I'm not aware of that particular situation, but I am prepared to look into that.

MR. PREYRA: I just want to clarify. I wasn't just talking about security. I was just talking about the mundane, day-to-day thing.

MS. FERGUSON: No, I understand. Yes.

MR. PREYRA: I should say that McKeen Manor has a wonderful building manager, a great custodian, and he's kind of the heart and soul of that building. The atmosphere in those two buildings is completely different as a result of, I think, really having an engagement with the community.

Do I have time for one quick question?

MADAM CHAIRMAN: A quick one, yes.

MR. PREYRA: I also have a question about student housing. It's really extraordinary, I have six universities in my constituency and there's a tremendous demand on neighbourhoods to provide housing. Many students are living in pretty sub-standard conditions; they're living in rooming houses. Particularly, I think now, as we go into the Fall, with energy costs going up, we'll see more and more students resorting to living anywhere they can. I'm wondering if there is any specific policy in place to deal with issues on the peninsula relating to - I know the universities are the front line group that are supposed to be addressing it, but is there any strategy in place with dealing with the particular needs of student housing during the academic year?

MR. TROKE: There are really a couple of things I could comment on. First, we spoke a little earlier about the lone parent student housing program that was put in place. That was one option.

The other is that many of the universities - you're right - work closely with our housing authorities, we have many individuals whom the housing authorities are able to assist with finding a suitable place to live. The other thing in metro, we have a bit of a difference in that one of the largest, co-op, non-profit portfolios exists here in metro, and much of it is here on the peninsula.

I do know that many of the co-ops and non-profits have, over time, had the opportunity, if they have a vacant unit, or two vacant units, to work with the universities as well to supply an opportunity for them to have a one or a two bedroom unit.

It's not so much that it's a policy, it's more that, from a working practice, we have been able to help many individuals to find accommodation through those three things I mentioned. The focal point on it, though, is really the housing authority and the relationship that has with the universities and many of the individuals who apply to the housing authority.

That has been a vehicle that has been used. I guess the other thing is that over time many of the universities have also developed many affiliations directly with the non-profits and co-ops as well. They've been able to work without even the department being involved because they've developed these relationships to be able to help people, suitable housing in a safe condition and so on. So I think there has been from a practical perspective quite a bit of work that has been done.

MS. FERGUSON: Sorry, Madam Chairman - just before, in terms of your point that you brought up earlier around the youth piece in HRM, I do want to say that we still have work to do in terms of Nunn. I think the direction is right, I think the pilots are exciting. We have high hopes that we're going to be able to move forward on that but I take your point in terms of having to be able to get there.

The other thing I would like to say though, particularly in metro, there is ongoing work between our child welfare staff and HRM Regional Police specifically dealing with youth to ensure that we have the right protocols in place, to ensure that we are all doing the best we can in the current circumstances. So those two groups are working together on a regular basis and putting some steps in place to address exactly the kind of situations that you raised. So I just wanted you to know that there is some work going on in that area.

[10:45 a.m.]

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Thank you. Keith, and we each have about five minutes total.

MR. KEITH COLWELL: I've got to ask the question, the minister announced a couple of years ago they're going to put elevators in the seniors' complexes throughout the province. I did put a request in on behalf of the residents of the Sarah Jane Clayton Manor in East Preston for an elevator and never got any kind of an answer, never got any kind of response, and there's a lot of elderly people in that building. Typically in that area, people stay in their own homes as long as they possibly can and they sort of go into the seniors' complex as a last resort. Is there any word on an elevator for that facility?

MS. FERGUSON: I can't speak to that exact facility, I'll talk globally and then Dan can fill in the details if I've missed anything. Over this year and next, we're going to spend approximately \$3.75 million and we're going to put in 15 new elevators right across the province. I can't speak to that specific one. I could get back to you on the details on that and I'm happy to.

MR. COLWELL: Yes, if you would.

MS. FERGUSON: But that's the plan over the next year.

MR. COLWELL: Yes, and that's my total senior citizens' complex in my whole riding.

MS. FERGUSON: I appreciate that and we can get back to you on it.

MR. RYAN: What was the name of that one?

MR. COLWELL: Sarah Jane Clayton Manor and it's in East Preston. The sad part about that facility is there's nothing for the residents there to do. It's an area very close to where they lived which is excellent because they can stay near family and friends, but there's no grocery store they can walk to. There's no convenience store they can walk to. There's absolutely nothing they can walk to in a decent walking distance for anyone. Most of them don't have cars and we have residents there, most residents I would guess at this point are 80 plus and a second-floor apartment is a very difficult thing, especially if you're getting groceries or anything else. So I would ask you to consider that one very seriously and I know you will.

There have been many things we've talked about here and I agree with my colleagues on many of the questions that have been asked here. It's very difficult. My biggest issue, I have some issues, too, that I would like to address with the deputy minister privately afterwards in another community I have, is a very serious issue we have to address, but it's not to do primarily with housing. Again, we talked about the increase in the limits for seniors. This is a very serious issue for our area. We have seniors who have worked all their lives to get a home. Sometimes the home wasn't built maybe to the best of standards because it's all the people had at the time, all the income they had and all they could afford. Now the houses are really starting to show their wear and tear and they do the best they possibly can to maintain them. But, a lot of people simply don't have the pension income - hopefully as time goes on people's pension income will increase and this will become less and less of a problem - but, unfortunately, we have many, many people who are living there on their own or with someone else.

You talked about RRAP kicking in. We have tried to apply for some of those in the past and we never quite seemed to make it when we really need some things in place. How do we access that program more easily, as long as the people meet the requirement and all that. I still believe the requirement is too low, but how do we get them to access that because there's a lot of homes in my area that could use that assistance and guaranteed that the people would live there, they don't want to leave.

MR. TROKE: Yes, I guess first and foremost I'd like to mention that I had an opportunity to meet with the folks at WADE and the Black Construction Association, to talk about the very issue. One of the things that we're going to do, first of all - from a

perspective of allowing individuals to be able to apply for these programs and so on - we're making arrangements so that we will have one of our program officers actually work out of one of the WADE offices for a day every month, to be able to take applications. We're going to try that out to see if we can make it more accessible for people to be able to at least get their information to us and that we can talk to them without them having to deal with any transportation issues or whatever. So that's one thing that we were exploring.

The second thing, I guess, is that you're right - the Preston area has been able to access either the senior citizens or the provincial emergency program from time to time. Then, as you slide through to the cost-shared program, sometimes there are challenges with the title of the property. That's typically one of the areas that can run into a snag.

We have talked to CMHC about that issue and when we go through a renewal process we look at, are there ways that in certain segments to be able to deal with some of the challenges associated with, is it clear title or not, and are there ways in which we can help people? Because ultimately it's about making sure somebody is in a safe place to live.

So I know that our regional folks have worked closely with the community, through the provincial programs, to do as much as they can, and it has been utilized quite a bit. I know that the issue that you mention has been raised and one of the things that we look at is, if they're eligible and the repairs go beyond, say, one of the provincial programs at \$5,000 as a limit, and they go into RRAP, certainly any of the criteria, if it is met, they would be eligible for the program, they would be able to get quotes and so on.

As I know, the main challenge that has happened typically has been around that of clear title of a property, whenever we run into it, and we have been working with our partners on that because it has been brought to us before. Certainly as we move forward with these programs, we're going to continue to see if there's opportunities in those situations to see what we can do to help folks out. But I do know the provincial program has been used quite successfully for many of the furnaces and the roofs and so on. But we are also making efforts to make sure that if transportation or getting to us becomes a challenge, we're doing our best to spend more time in the community, working with the folks to get the applications and to understand the circumstances. So we have been making some efforts with WADE and the Black Construction Association to get our folks into the community to get those applications.

MR. COLWELL: Thank you.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Thank you. Perhaps to save time I'll just rely on the Vice-Chair to give me a signal in five minutes. Thank you.

I want to go back to the bilateral agreements. I'm going to ask my questions up front, in case I run out of time. I'm looking for reassurance that the Province of Nova Scotia is spending all the money available to it each year on affordable housing. I've looked at various press releases and graphs and what not and there seems to be - because they're

different times of the year or different years or whatever, there seems to be differences in figures. So I would just like some time down the road for the committee to be provided with that.

Also, I want to know if provinces and territories are limited to the 12.5 per cent, or if they're able to supplement, with provincial dollars. I mean is that just a baseline?

Again, I want to know, for the third one, what the actual money being spent by the Province of Nova Scotia in 2003 was and what the actual number of dollars spent from the provincial budget in 2008/2009 will be. It's only because - I'm not suggesting there's a problem, I just need to see that kind of sort of comprehensive view. So if you have any of that information, I'd be please to, in two minutes, get a response. Thank you.

MR. TROKE: Okay. I guess the three questions, first of all, with regard to reporting on affordable housing, more than happy to provide information as to what we've done and with regard to the reports to the general public, on affordable housing. Second of all, I guess, with regard to the 12.5 per cent; yes, it has, there have been years where the province has contributed more than the 12.5 per cent, particularly with regard to major capital improvements and so on and there have been efforts made. Then I guess with regards to where we are in 2003-08, we certainly can get that information and provide that to you.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: I appreciate that because I remember going to, I think it was the first Healthy Communities Conference that Nova Scotia held, I don't know, back in the early, it might have been 2000, 2001, I'm not sure, and there was a significant delegation there from the Department of Housing in those days. They did a presentation and everyone was so impressed with the vision and the strategic plan that they had in place. It seems to have been lost or I don't hear much about it any more. I have no idea whether it's off the table. Are any of you familiar with that particular plan and where is it?

MR. TROKE: Well, I'm not familiar with the particular plan but I certainly will take a look to see if I can find that specific plan if it was rolled out. I guess one of the things that I can say is that with regard to what we do and how we do it, the strategy around delivering for low income Nova Scotians has been fairly consistent since the late 1990s with regards to thresholds and programs and so on. We've kind of moved them around based on advice and information that we receive, but if there's a specific plan that you would like some comment on, I'll go back and take a look. I'm not familiar with that specific plan, no, that you referenced.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Thank you very much. Perhaps I'll give a couple of minutes to the deputy minister, if you would like to wrap up before we go back to - we have some organizational items to deal with at the end of the meeting.

MS. FERGUSON: I'll be very brief, Madam Chairman, I would just like to say thank you very much to you and the committee members for the opportunity to come and talk about affordable housing and homelessness today. First of all, I would like to thank

everybody very much for the kind comments they made about the staff of the department. I do think that we have exceptional staff in the department who work extremely hard and go the extra mile every day. I will send those comments back to staff and I thank you very much. I'm very proud of the staff we have in the department, and as we continue to work, one of the things we're really working on is working together even better ourselves, in departments, recognizing that a number of clients access a number of services in our department and we're really striving to work in a more effective method so that we can look more holistically at the client in the department. So thank you very much for your comments.

Secondly, I would like to say that a lot of what we're talking about today is really around the broader poverty issue and that, obviously, that's a very complex issue and that's an issue that impacts government. We have a significant role in that in the Department of Community Services but I am optimistic in terms of my colleagues and the commitment I know I have around the deputy's table in terms of recognizing, to Mr. Zinck's comments, that this is an issue that we really need to look at and, again, that we need to look in a holistic way in terms of what are the needs of the clients and families and communities that we serve as a government.

I think the approach that we took in the Nunn Commission is a start in terms of how can we work better as departments, but I think in terms to really address the poverty issue, we really need to work together as departments and I can tell you that certainly, in this department, we're very committed to that. We do look forward to the recommendations of that report.

I would also like to tell you that the federal-provincial social services deputies have two priorities in the upcoming year for our discussions with the federal government and they are around early childhood from a very early prevention perspective, which again is part, I think, of the poverty agenda but also the second priority is the poverty agenda. It was recognized very early days that, that tabled in and of ourselves, social services deputies aren't going to be able to address that either without help from our colleagues. So I do think there's a recognition at all levels of government, first of all, addressing the poverty issue is a priority; secondly, that we are going to have to work together, and I would even expand that to say with our community partners, which is why we are looking forward to the recommendations that we'll get out of that strategy.

The last thing I would like to say, we didn't have a chance to talk about it very much today understandably given the topic but, obviously, a big piece to looking at these issues is having a prevention focus, and I think in terms of the work from Nunn, pieces that are coming out of the crime strategy, a lot of the work around early childhood and early intervention, and I mean really early on, even looking at zero to 24-months time period, there is some significant work being done around that and I think the prevention piece is an important part as we continue to have these discussions. So, again, thank you very much for the opportunity, I appreciate it, and we'll follow up on the requests and ensure that we get the information to the committee.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Thank you and, again, we know how busy you all are and we appreciate your time with us today on this important issue. So thank you very much for coming.

MS. FERGUSON: Thank you.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Committee members, rather than take a short break, perhaps we'll just quickly continue on. I think the two letters have been distributed to you. We've had responses to two of our motions. We had a response from the Minister of Health, reaffirming that the Department of Health will not be developing a working group on autism, as we had recommended, to look at the lifelong needs of people with autism.

We've also had a response from Minister Muir, from Service Nova Scotia and Municipal Relations. As we all know, the 211 system was not funded in the Spring budget and he's just affirming that position of the government. So those are the two items of correspondence. Any discussion?

Just going on to the second part, we continue to get requests to meet with the committee and as has been our practice, we usually set up one or two organizational meetings a year whereby we collate these requests, we can prioritize them and we also invite the three caucuses to submit other topics that we might pursue. So I would like to suggest that since the all-day forum this year is going to be on disability issues, and we've already set that for September 23rd, the final topic from last year's priority list is the Seniors' Pharmacare Program and that has been organized for Tuesday, October 7th. I'd like to suggest that we add to that a session whereby we can organize the agenda for the upcoming month. Would that be satisfactory?

AN HON. MEMBER: Yes.

MR. ZINCK: You're talking September?

MADAM CHAIRMAN: No, that would be October 7th, that meeting. So perhaps we could ask the Committees Office to get back to the groups who are requesting to appear and let them know that those requests will be considered early in October, and that we'll be in touch with them.

Any other business? If not, have a great summer and thanks very much.

[The committee adjourned at 11:01 a.m.]