

HANSARD

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COMMITTEE

ON

COMMUNITY SERVICES

Tuesday, November 3, 2009

Committee Room 1

Poverty Reduction Strategy

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COMMUNITY SERVICES COMMITTEE

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[Mr. Alfie MacLeod was replaced by Mr. Keith Bain.]

In Attendance:

Ms. Kim Leadley
Legislative Committee Clerk

WITNESSES

Department of Community Services

Ms. Judith Ferguson, Deputy Minister

Ms. Lynn Hartwell, Executive Director - Policy and Information Management

Department of Labour and Workforce Development

Ms. Margaret MacDonald, Deputy Minister

Mr. Stuart Gourley, Senior Executive Director

HALIFAX, TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 3, 2009

STANDING COMMITTEE ON COMMUNITY SERVICES

10:00 A.M.

CHAIRMAN
Mr. Jim Morton

MR. CHAIRMAN: We will get started. Our clerk will be here in a moment, I'm sure. My name is Jim Morton. I chair the Standing Committee on Community Services and I'm the MLA for Kings North. We have a new group, I think a round of introductions would be helpful.

[The committee members introduced themselves.]

MR. CHAIRMAN: We have witnesses for this next 50 minutes from the Department of Community Services and from the Department of Labour and Workforce Development. I wonder if you would introduce yourselves as well.

MS. JUDITH FERGUSON: Good morning, Mr. Chairman, thanks for the opportunity to come and discuss this important issue this morning. I'm Judith Ferguson, I'm the deputy from Community Services and with me is Lynn Hartwell who's our Executive Director of Policy and Information Management and was the co-chair of the poverty reduction working group. I'll turn it over to my colleague.

MS. MARGARET MACDONALD: Good morning, I'm Margaret MacDonald, Deputy Minister for Labour and Workforce Development, and with me this morning is Stu Gourley, who is the Senior Executive Director with the Skills and Learning Branch for the department.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Welcome. I just want to point out that we have several observers in the room and I want to welcome all of you here to this discussion this morning.

I think we'll begin to give you a few minutes to describe what's been happening with the Poverty Reduction Strategy, which is the focus of our discussion this morning. So I'll turn it back to you.

MS. MARGARET MACDONALD: We have a very brief presentation and I will start with some comments around it. It's up on the screen.

I have to say, this is a really interesting area to work in, it's not an area that I have worked in for a long period of time, but we're really, really pleased to be partnering with the department on some of the work that is being done, particularly around poverty. With apologies for those of you who are well familiar with the context of poverty, I'll just quickly run through the information.

I think it's worth noting, as the screen indicates, the poor in Nova Scotia are not an homogenous group. They're not people who we would - I think there's some sense that poverty really exists inside the IA, inside the Department of Community Services and those who are receiving income assistance, but there are many people who are living in poverty. Those who are actually working can still remain in a situation of poverty as well as unemployed persons.

I think the context, in terms of families, is interesting. There are families and children, two parent families as well as single parent families, particularly those headed by women, who tend to live in what we consider to be poverty. Also single people, disabled, seniors, and people from Aboriginal, African-Nova Scotian and immigrant communities. So with that bit of context, we will be able to speak in a little bit more detail a little later on in a few slides about some of those groups that we're working with.

Again, in some context: in 2007, 8.2 per cent of Nova Scotians - based on the LICO standard, the low income cut-off - lived in poverty, and I think it's just interesting to look at some of the numbers. Again, I think there's a sense that perhaps a lot of children and seniors live in poverty; in fact, there are many people who are in that group, but there are also a very large group of people between the ages of 18 and 64 who also live in poverty. That's a significant number of people there, who I guess maybe don't typically stand out.

I think it's also interesting to note that in the last 10 years, since 1998, there has been a reduction of people who are living below LICO - by about 40 per cent. We would attribute that to a couple of things. One, of course, is that over the last 10 years there has been a significant economic sort of boom in the country which really isn't in existence today. But there were also changes in the National and Nova Scotia Child Benefit, which would have moved a lot of children out of poverty and off those statistics. So some of the changes are attributable to that.

[10:15 a.m.]

Again, the numbers are, I think, quite significant: 35,000 single persons, and the majority of those live with a disability and 40 per cent are dependent on income assistance with around 3,000 seniors; 39,000 people within families, and again, majority single-parent families and 15,000 children under age 18.

Rural areas of the province experience the same as the urban areas. We're seeing, I think, in some other parts of the country, that it is becoming more of an urban issue, but I think in Nova Scotia it typically exists across the province. I think it's quite significant that of over 50,000 people, almost 70 per cent of the low income population have some involvement with income assistance. That means that they're not on income assistance at all times, but they do come in and out of the system at times in order to get that support.

I think what I'm learning, one of the challenges about that, is how to make those transitions better for people. I mean, I think going in and out seems to be hard stages as opposed to what we would rather see, something a bit smoother and something where you're able to come in and out as you need it as opposed to going through a lot of process each time.

So the percentage of children under 18 living in low-income situations is 8.4 per cent, which is slightly below the Canadian average, and the percentage of children in households headed by single mothers living in low income fell from 69 per cent in 1998 to 19.9 per cent in 2007. Again, we would attribute those changes to the economy and the increases to the child benefit.

So lots of causes for poverty and again, with apology for those who are clearly expert in this area, but I think it's interesting to look at our own concepts of poverty. Speaking for myself, I don't think they bear up well, when you look at where people are in terms of poverty. Many people are working and still experiencing poverty. They may lose their employment or have little opportunity for sustained employment. Again, the educational background is a huge factor in terms of being able to get a job and to stay in a position where you are employed.

Lack of marketable skills - again, the world is changing tremendously around us, so many people have difficulty keeping up with those changes in terms of what the workplace requires.

Ethnicity, life circumstances, work-limiting disabilities, and long-term dependence on income assistance - those are just a range of the things that we see that contribute to people living in poverty. At this stage I'm going to pass it over to Judith to continue with our presentation.

MS. FERGUSON: Thanks, Margaret. I just want to say that although Margaret and I are here from the Department of Community Services and Department of Labour

Workforce Development, the Poverty Reduction Group is actually a much broader number of departments which includes Education, Justice, Health, Health Promotion and Protection, and the Department of Finance. I think that's important because there is a recognition that poverty is a complex issue. It is not an issue that one department or one group of staff can address, so it really needs the whole of government approach. So we were very pleased with the Poverty Reduction Strategy, that we had a number of departments at the table and actually able to take a much more holistic and broad view and approach to that.

With that said, I'm just going to give you a very brief history in terms of how we got to today, and I won't go through it all in detail except to say this committee started some work in January 2006. In 2007, the Community Coalition to End Poverty in Nova Scotia released a framework for Poverty Reduction Strategy. Subsequently there were meetings of a number of diverse organizations to discuss and prioritize actions. Then in December 2007, Bill No. 94 was passed. In January 2008, the Poverty Reduction Working Group was established. In March, we received responses from about 1,300 public questionnaires and in June 2008, the working group delivered its report. In April 2009, the government released its strategy, *Preventing Poverty. Promoting Prosperity*. In October, I believe it was the 14th, we had the first meeting of the Ministerial Committee on poverty.

I'd just like to say that the Poverty Reduction Working Group was a diverse group of people who met for a significant amount of time every two weeks and put a tremendous amount of effort and time and commitment into the report that we eventually received. We were very impressed with their commitment and the depth and the level of expertise that they all brought to the table, so obviously that report is extremely valuable for us.

This one page is really just a - we put in a picture form really what the framework for the Poverty Reduction Strategy is, so we've been using this, as we've gone forward, to describe the strategy. The Poverty Reduction Strategy is a high-level framework document, and it's that way on purpose, because it's meant to really identify the areas that we're going to look at and then, as governments decide on new priorities, we can work on those priorities throughout the strategy.

We believe it's a strong framework, there are a lot of language and concepts from the committee that have been incorporated into this and in government we're using it as a lens through which to look at all measures that we're doing as a government in terms of helping poverty. It's helping us from an horizontal perspective, say, focus not so much on the departments, but actually what are the services that the departments are providing, and how do they fit within the framework.

In terms of the goals of the Poverty Reduction Strategy, it improves supports for those most in need, reward work, focus on our families and coordinate and collaborate. Again, it's important because this is the lens that we're looking at as we evaluate initiatives that we have ongoing and what we will be thinking about as we go into the future.

The next slide really talks about the what and the how, so it's just some further detail. I'm not going to go through it line by line in terms of the goals and objectives of the Poverty Reduction Strategy, but again, it helps us as we start to look at our priorities and when we get together with our inter-departmental group in government to say, how are we going to move forward on this? What are the priorities? What are the things we need to focus on? We are actually focusing on these pieces as a group and as a government and dealing with them together.

The other point I'd like to say is that there has been a lot of talk about horizontal government and doing things better within government and working better within departments, and that's a huge piece of the strategy for us. It's not just the "what we're doing", it's the "how we're doing it", and really trying to take a client-centered focused approach and look at what are the needs of the clients and then how do we work on that as departments, as opposed to trying to fit the clients within the silos of the government departments, so we've been doing that. I think we still have a way to go but that's definitely the philosophy that we're looking at as we move forward on the strategy.

The next slide is really just to look at what we're doing now because there are many programs offered through departments and there are a lot of pieces to this. As you can see there are a lot of different departments involved, so poverty reduction, as I said earlier, is far bigger than just one department. I just wanted to give people a sense of where we were today and I'm sure we'll get an opportunity to talk about that a little bit more. Actually, we heard from the poverty reduction group that a big issue that people have is not understanding where all of the services are and how they can access them, so that's obviously something that we need to do a better job on.

Where are we now? Again, the language goes back to the language I showed you earlier, but this was just a bit of an update on the commitments that were made through the strategy and our progress. Again, I won't go through these in detail but goal one was enabling and rewarding work. You can see there's the work that Margaret and her folks are doing around the labour market and increasing minimum wage, removing disincentives for income assistance clients, so simply a quick update. Goal two was improving supports for those in need. There was the IA increase, the affordable housing money. We're currently underway with reviewing the Employment Support and Income Assistance Program and we'll be starting to look at a long-term housing strategy.

Third goal is focusing on our children. The Nova Scotia Child Benefit - we expanded the eligibility bans for that. That's been done and that helps families not only receive more money and to have more families eligible through the Nova Scotia Child Care Benefit Program but it's also the eligibility standard for Low Income Pharmacare for Children. So it also assists in the fact that more families are now eligible for low income Pharmacare. Creating more subsidized portable child spaces - that's a work in progress and we recently announced an additional \$6 million last week and 300 more child care spaces. Then the goal for "Collaborate and Coordinate" - that's obviously how we govern the

strategy and how we focus in government to make sure that we're actually focusing on the client to making sure that the services meet the clients' needs.

The ministerial committee was established and, as I said earlier, they met last week. The coordinator for the implementation of the strategy has been hired. We are working on developing a suite of measures because we think it's really important that we're able to report back and that we're able to measure our progress. If we have things that aren't working well, we can change that and stop that and do other things. We're working with some of our colleagues in Newfoundland and Labrador and some other provinces because there are a number of provinces that are engaged in the poverty discussion right now. So there's a lot of good work that we're sharing on measures and we're working to develop a community engagement model. As we go forward with the Poverty Reduction Strategy obviously this is a significant piece and it's important that we engage the community as we move forward.

So briefly, where are we now? Our Employment Support and Income Assistance redesign project is focusing on ways to remove barriers so that clients can regain their independence. Margaret referenced the fact that people transition back and forth out of income assistance. It's not something that we like to see so we really need to focus on what are the kinds of benefits people need to transition off in a way that there's meaningful employment, ensuring that the services are flexible and meet the needs of the clients and are really trying to focus in on who is the client base and what are the needs of the client base, and how can we tailor the services to meet the clients and not the other way around, and improving supports and services for clients with disabilities.

There will be a very concerted focus on people living with disabilities as we move through the strategy because we know that the challenges that they face are different and separate, that they need to have a specific focus, and we'll be doing that. Margaret.

MS. MARGARET MACDONALD: I think as many of you are aware, when we talk about LMDA, that's the Labour Market Development Agreement and as of July 1, 2009, that agreement was entered into between the Government of Canada and Nova Scotia. So the Province of Nova Scotia has taken over the responsibility for delivering those programs and there are about \$81 million worth of it. We've also had a labour market agreement with about \$14 million a year, I think we're into year two and it was over a six-year period.

So what's really exciting about that is that there are a lot of employment supports built in, like all of that is directed to the labour market and to getting people appropriately educated and attached to the workforce. So for us, I guess I can't say enough about the opportunities that we're going to have to work with Community Services because, as I've said, I think we do good work in our branch and if we were left alone and we continued to do good work, I think it would all be good work because I think each individual is getting something out of the work that we do, but I think we have to be a lot more strategic about it. So one of the real benefits for us in working on a poverty strategy is for us to be able to

kind of reach out to people like the staff at Community Services and say, well, what is it that people need in order to get into the labour force and to be able to stay there.

I think one of the more exciting things for me is that what we intend to do is to collaborate around some of the supports. So we have supports inside of our programs in order to get people to work but Community Services also has supports built in to many of their programs for the same purpose. So we need to be able to get together to talk about making sure that we coordinate those services so that they're going as far as they can possibly go, we're not duplicating our efforts, or we're not working against one another.

So in terms of, you know, horizontality or whatever you want to call it, we are really excited and we're very well intended about getting at that kind of work. We've lots of challenges inside our department and you're not necessarily interested in hearing them but the LMDA really is designed to get to as many Nova Scotians as possible and that's on a wide spectrum. We clearly want to work with businesses in terms of some of their issues. So there's a lot we have to do inside the LMDA but for purposes of working on the poverty strategy there's a remarkable piece of work that we do want to engage in.

Under the Labour Market Development Agreement as well, when I mentioned some of the disadvantaged groups, as we call them - the Aboriginal Nova Scotians, African Nova Scotians, people with disabilities - the Labour Market Development Agreement is really directed towards people in those groups and getting them again attached to the labour market, getting the appropriate training. So there's just real opportunities out there for us to get to work on some of those issues.

We'd like to come back in December, if we could, and give you more detail around some of those activities - if that would be of any interest to the committee.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Okay, thank you. That's a great segue, because I wanted to remind everybody in the room that this is the beginning of a discussion that will continue on December 1st, I think it is, so I thank you for that introduction.

Now I haven't noticed any hands up for the first questions, but I expect there are some in the room. Leo, to begin with.

MR. LEO GLAVINE: Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and thank you to all of you - rather than reintroduce the names here - for coming in today and giving us a little bit of a peek at least of where things are heading.

[10:30 a.m.]

Just as a general tone, I'm wondering if the new minister, as she acquainted herself with the department and the legislation that you've referenced today - did the new minister put this as a high priority for her, or was it just part of kind of a general introduction to where we are with Community Services?

MS. FERGUSON: I'm happy to tell you it was one of the first things, Mr. Glavine, that we talked about with the new minister, and she actually has come in with some ideas of her own, which is wonderful for us, and within the very first few days she was asking about the ministerial committee and where we'll sit. So I'm very pleased to say that we have a minister who is extremely supportive of the strategy and had already been thinking about what we could do, and has been very involved as we talked about the redesign of ESIA - is very much involved in that process.

I can also just briefly - I don't want to speak for Margaret, but I know in the opportunities that we've had to meet with Minister More as well, that they're both extremely committed to moving forward, so I think we're well situated for this piece of work to move forward.

MR. GLAVINE: I expected as much, so I am pleased to have it confirmed from that perspective.

Did you have to hire any new staff to give strong and undivided attention to some of the elements that you've given a broad reference to today, in terms of four definable goals for example?

MS. FERGUSON: We have. I think I mentioned the presentation, the poverty strategy. A piece of that was that there would be a coordinator of the strategy hired - and that person has been hired and they currently reside in the Department of Community Services, so that position has been filled.

In addition, though, I would say that I'm very lucky - we have a very strong policy shop in the department, and in conjunction with Margaret's people too, in their shop, that we've had a number of people working on this for quite some time. We've amassed a lot of work, a lot of information already, so there has been a high priority put on this work in both departments. I think that we're in pretty good shape to begin to move this forward.

MR. GLAVINE: You can cut me off whenever you want, but just one more?

MR. CHAIRMAN: Okay. You're on a bit of a roll, so keep going.

MR. GLAVINE: One of the areas that every MLA in this room and even our new colleagues probably already, you know, have touched the face, the front line of the ESIA programs, of course, and I have the greatest respect for those workers and I'm fortunate in the Middleton office to be able to deal with them on a very first-hand basis. Some offices don't do the same thing, they screen you from the frontline workers.

However, I think in order to make one of the key areas - they deal face-to-face, weekend, month in, year in, year out with many of these people, I still think there will need to be a strong educative piece and a rethink to have holistic assessments done of the

recipients in order to, I think, start that movement out of the cycle of poverty - families who are second or third generation. So is that going to take place?

I feel strongly if that doesn't take place we'll make some improvements, but not maybe as deep as what could take place.

MS. FERGUSON: I'm really glad that you raised that. Thank you for the comments as well about the staff in the department, who are extremely committed. The ESIA redesign is really going to have a much more holistic perspective to it. In terms of your discussion which I think is around looking at the needs of the entire client, that's right, and looking at it from a more holistic approach both within the department and across departments.

That is something we're going to look at as part of the ESIA redesign - it's not just going to be tweaking around the edges of the piece. It's actually going to be looking at what the program is, what the services are, who are the clients, who should the clients be and then how do we deliver the service. It will be from a much broader perspective.

MR. GLAVINE: Thank you.

MR. CHAIRMAN: I think we will go to Mr. Ramey and then Ms. Regan.

MR. GARY RAMEY: Thank you for the presentation, it was very helpful. As a matter of fact, you've answered some of my questions in your presentation, which is great.

I can narrow down my first question quite a bit here. I was going to ask you what's happened since the Poverty Reduction Strategy came out in the Spring, but in the "Where are we now" section, I can read and understand that. What I'd like to ask you in relation to that is, what do you think is the most significant thing that's happened since the Poverty Reduction Strategy has come out? Of all the things you've listed there, what do you think is the most significant thing that's been done in relation to that file?

MS. FERGUSON: I don't know if I could narrow it down to one thing. I think sitting from where we sit in the Department of Community Services, what we have found extremely helpful is the approach that government has taken to the strategy. I would say that we're not going to fix poverty in the Department of Community Services - we basically need a whole of government approach. We've received that and we're moving forward on that basis.

I would say that coupled with the fact that we're going to look at it from a client-centred approach. Who are the people we're serving? The fact that philosophy is kind of the way we're going to move forward so there's a commitment for all departments to move forward on that basis. I think if we're going to have meaningful results - and to Mr. Glavine's point of, if we're going to start to get at the root causes and talk about how we deal with the cycle of poverty - then we really need to do that across departments and have input from everyone.

The fact that we have that and we have everybody that's committed at the table, I think the measures that will come out. Those are all important, but I think the approach and the commitment and the beginning of the understanding around how we need to deal with this at this stage is the biggest thing to help us all move forward. I'll open it up to Margaret too.

MS. MARGARET MACDONALD: I agree. I think we're starting to make a little bit of headway in government about that, this is not an issue that just simply rests inside the Department of Community Services. It's a much bigger issue and we need to have other supports, there are a whole lot of factors that contribute to it. I agree with Judith and I think that's not easy to do. Everybody has another piece of work that they're working on, but I think we're actually doing some really good work in that area.

MR. RAMEY: Thank you. I have a follow-up to that. It's no secret, when I responded to the Speech from the Throne, I indicated in that speech that one of the main reasons I entered government was to see some action on the poverty file. That's public knowledge and it is one of the main reasons I entered government. This has already been alluded to also by Ms. Ferguson when she was speaking earlier on about the departments that were involved. Could you just elaborate on which departments those are again? It comes directly from your response to the last question. You said it's a department-wide approach as opposed to a Department of Community Services only approach. Which departments are involved?

MS. FERGUSON: So, it's the Department of Community Services, Department of Labour and Workforce Development, Department of Education, Department of Health, Department of Justice, Department of Health Promotion and Protection, Department of Finance, and Department of Economic and Rural Development.

MR. RAMEY: Virtually all of them. Then, very quickly, maybe this is the most important one. I'm wondering what steps are planned for the next six months on the Poverty Reduction Strategy and is the department moving towards solid number goals, based on a set timeline?

MS. FERGUSON: I think what will be part of what we'll be looking at in the next six months is the work plan for the strategy. Obviously the minister's committee just had its first meeting and we need to meet with the committee, we need to get some direction from the committee.

We are continuing to work on things like ESIA redesign and the housing stimulus and all of the work that Margaret's shop is doing. So we will continue along the road with that and then begin to identify new priorities in conjunction with the feedback, I think, that we receive from the minister's committee. So that would be our goal.

MR. RAMEY: So when you come back in December you'll be able to give us some sort of an update?

MS. FERGUSON: My understanding - yes, we should have more solid targets for you by the time we meet in December, in terms of direction.

MR. RAMEY: Super, thank you very much.

MS. MARGARET MACDONALD: If I could add to that, we again coming back to the LMDA again - it's only a couple of months since it was devolved to Nova Scotia and we have inherited programs that were developed on a national basis. So we need to look at those programs and make them more in Nova Scotia-centric, I guess to use a well-worn phrase, so that is going to take us a while to do that.

We're going to be working on what we need to do around making some of those programs more specific to Nova Scotians. I think it's going to take us a while and we'll have to do some work, I think, with the federal government because they're still very much involved in the program. We've been delegated, not sort of handed the whole thing without any sort of boundaries. So that's an area that we're going to be working on as well.

MR. RAMEY: Thank you very much and that's it for me, Mr. Chairman.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Ms. Regan and then I know Mr. Preyra is on the list.

MS. KELLY REGAN: In terms of the LMDA, are we, as a province, putting any funds in there or is that all strictly coming from the federal government and we're administering it?

MS. MARGARET MACDONALD: The LMDA itself is federal money. Well, it's actually employment insurance money that is collected and goes into the EI fund and then gets distributed to provinces through that way. So up until July, Nova Scotia was receiving, by way of a reasonably complicated formula under the legislation, a certain amount of dollars that were being provided to Nova Scotians. We've taken that over.

So yes, that is all federal money but we do have some money, not necessarily directed to LMDA specifically but we have small budget that we also use in order to do similar type work inside of the department.

MS. REGAN: When you say a small budget, how much would that be?

MS. MARGARET MACDONALD: I think it's around \$6 million.

MS. REGAN: When I look at the diagrams of all the different sort of facets that go into government measures, income assistance, those are all good but I notice that transportation isn't in there. I have to say that probably of the first 10 phone calls non-congratulatory that I got post-election, I would say at least one-third or possibly one-half were surrounding the issue of transportation. It might be getting granddad to his dialysis

but it also, there were calls from frustrated parents who finally found a job for their disabled child but they couldn't get them to their job.

It's an issue that sort of ebbs and flows in my office but I do hear a lot about the lack of transportation, affordable transportation for people who are either in poverty or are in poverty and have disabilities. Is there any plan to include transportation in government measures?

MS. FERGUSON: The transportation issue was flagged in the very early days by the Poverty Reduction Committee and there are issues both rural and urban around the transportation issue, for sure. We're well aware of them for income assistance clients, in terms of being able to take advantage of opportunities for work.

As we look at what kind of supports people need to transition on, and we talked about really making sure that the supports are tailored to the clients, we are going to look at the transportation piece. Now obviously we'll have to do that in conjunction with our colleagues in government because neither Margaret nor I are responsible for the transportation agenda but there are some significant issues there. We know that and appreciate that. We walked about it through the Poverty Reduction Committee Report and it is something that we're going to be looking at.

MS. REGAN: I think I'm looking at it from a suburban focus but I grew up in a rural area and I can tell you, if you don't have a car, trying to get to town is very difficult and if you're poor, you probably don't have a car, or if you do it is not reliable. My concern would be, how do you move out of that into employment, if you can't really know when you're going to get to work?

MS. FERGUSON: Exactly, transportation is a significant issue so, like I said, we will be looking at that in terms of the kinds of benefits that people require to transition out to the system. Transportation, child care - there are a number of issues that all attach, I would say, to that piece that we'll be looking at.

MS. LYNN HARTWELL: May I just add a piece under the transportation? There is an inter-departmental committee, which has already started working on developing a transportation strategy for the province and that's lead, I believe, by the Department of Transportation and Infrastructure Renewal and Service Nova Scotia and Municipal Relations folks. We are part of that because we are recognizing that obviously the services we are providing, we need to have a robust transportation system throughout the province, so that work is underway.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Okay, Mr. Preyra.

MR. LEONARD PREYRA: Just a couple of quick questions. The slide on Poverty in Context 2007 - 8.2 per cent of Nova Scotians live in poverty. Is that before or after supports?

[10:45 p.m.]

MS. HARTWELL: That right now is after. We use the low income cut-off measure after tax so that would be the net number. If I could just say something about the measures. We use the low income cut-off measure in Nova Scotia for a couple of reasons, one, the data is available, but also because it's the commonly used measure across the country and so we're able to compare. There are other measures. There is the low income measure, there are market basket measures and what we're hearing from social development organizations is they really are recommending that we have a suite of measures because any one measure - you can fall into the situation of starting to debate the veracity of that measure when all of the measures show the same thing. There are a significant number of people who are living in poverty and that the populations, regardless of how you measure it, are roughly the same.

When we consult with the public or meet with people, we are always asked about why we chose this measure and the answer is really, it's the best one for us to use because it can illustrate where we sit relative to the other jurisdictions, really the world. However, it should never be taken alone as the only way we can measure poverty. This is meant to be the best representation of after tax where people sit.

MR. PREYRA: Same slide, it says that since 1998 the numbers have been down since 127,000. Do we have any more recent or current data on what impact the current recession has had on those numbers and are we back up to those numbers? Are you relatively confident that those numbers are still down?

MS. HARTWELL: The last year that Statistics Canada has provided the information is 2007 - as information comes out, then we will update. However, that being said, we are of course staying on top of our own Income Assistance program and other programs that are income tested to see whether there has been an uptake. As I understand it, in recent months there has been a slight increase in income assistance rates, not a steep increase however and maybe not as much as we would have expected.

One thing that is really yet to be fully explored is the relationship between employment insurance and income assistance. We may find that after people exhaust their employment insurance benefits that we may see another trend as well, but we certainly know that there is that relationship, but thus far, the numbers have not increased anywhere near the 1998 levels and we certainly wouldn't expect them to in this short period of time as well.

MR. PREYRA: Just three quick comments on my constituency-related issues that we deal with. One is, I don't see a reference in here to pensions. That seems to be a huge issue down here, especially for seniors and single women and single parent families.

A question of Pharmacare, I know there is a program in place now and I would like to get some indication - not here because I know that Chris has a question here as well -

but just in terms of where we are in terms of who we're reaching with the low income Pharmacare program.

Also, transition programs. I know we've got a lot of work being done in the community and in the constituencies but people on the front lines say that they get into programs and then people are out of programs and there isn't any way of tracking what happens to people after they've been through a program - they seem to go in and out of programs rather than get into it for long periods or get out of it for long periods. So I'm wondering if there is any kind of tracking - more comments than questions, I think.

MS. FERGUSON: Just very briefly, we have the numbers. We didn't bring them with us today but we can get those to you in terms of the Pharmacare numbers because we have those. In terms of the transitional Pharmacare Program, that's part of what we're going to look at through ESIA redesign in terms of what are, you know, in terms of when people move from income assistance to work and what are the suite of benefits that they need to have a good and solid transition. Obviously Pharmacare is one of those for a lot of people. So how can we do that in a way that really assists to transition them solidly from income assistance? That's a piece that we're definitely looking at.

MS. MARGARET MACDONALD: I'm a bit interested in your comment on pensions. The subject of the Pension Benefits Act as it deals with private-sector pensions is under the mandate of Labour and Workforce Development. So we would certainly be interested to know what your issues are there. I guess in the context of poverty, I mean the difficulty there, of course, is that many pensions, at least private-sector-type pensions, come out of a workplace. So, first, you have to get people into the workplace, right, before you can . . .

MR. PREYRA: People without pensions . . .

MS. MARGARET MACDONALD: Well, those types of pensions - I mean there are income supports again from a pension perspective for seniors, you know, if you look at OAS, perhaps CPP and those sorts of things. The real challenge around pensions, I think in the context of poverty may be that, you know, you have to get people into the workplace and hopefully into a workplace where there is a pension plan.

MR. CHAIRMAN: I think that moves us to Mr. Zinck.

MR. TREVOR ZINCK: Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and thank you all for coming out. I'm looking forward to continuing the dialogue in December as well. I'm going to focus on ESIA. I know we're running out of time so I'm going to throw out a couple things here. I'm very happy to see that we're looking at redesigning the model.

Keeping to the comments of Mr. Glavine, front-line staff, caseworkers, supervisors, I'm going to throw out a couple of questions here. How active have the conversations been with those folks as far as the front-line knowledge that they see, some of the frustrations

that a caseworker might have had with policy? Another question would be, what have we actually looked at as far as the redesign? How deep have we dug? Are we looking at just the rates? Are we looking at policy, perhaps outdated policies, and when do we think that redesign will be finished, approved and implemented?

MS. FERGUSON: In terms of front-line staff, I would say we work really hard in the department to get feedback from front-line staff on an ongoing basis all the time and there's a process for that. It's not always perfect, mind you; it's a big department. Communication is a challenge in the department and it's something we've been working on since I've been there for the last six years. I think we've made some good strides but I think we still have a way to go. The staff are always encouraged to provide their feedback. It's something that we look for and I can remember when the previous deputy was there and she did her first dialogue sessions, the best feedback that we got from the dialogue sessions and the changes that we made in the department were as a direct result of the feedback that we got from the front-line staff.

So I would say we do that on an ongoing basis but specifically for ESIA redesign, we are going to have a process to specifically engage our front-line staff because they have a lot to offer, a lot to give, a lot of experience, and so there will be a process specifically for the front-line staff in the department.

In terms of what we're going to look at, I would say at this point in terms of where we are, that everything is on the table in terms of where we go. Now, obviously, we'll need to discuss that with the ministerial committee and get feedback and that kind of thing, but there really is a wanting from both ministers to really take a holistic approach. So are we going to look at rates? Yes. Are we going to look at policies? Yes. I can't provide exact specifics on all of that yet but, you know, we've been talking about looking at models, different kinds of models, including service-delivery models.

Then your final question - I really think at this stage it's premature to ask that because those are discussions that we'll need to have with the ministerial committee in terms of timelines and plans. So hopefully when we come back in December, we'll be able to give you some firmer details as to what that process will actually look like.

MR. ZINCK: Again keeping on the same wavelength as Mr. Glavine, I think it's critical that the folks who are entering this system, that from the very beginning - and I've said this for the last three and half years - I think it would lend itself to tremendous support for a caseworker who may be feeling stressed or pressures at not seeing people transition and move forward, or caseworkers who might be frustrated with policies they know aren't effective. So it's nice to hear that there is actually a process being put in place to hear their comments and feedback, and I want to make it public that I have the deepest respect for the staff that I deal with, currently, at Portland Street.

In actually seeing an individual move through the system, I absolutely think it's critical that we do that right in the very beginning. That, I think, begins with an honest

conversation and wanting to build a relationship and honestly wanting to see that person transition through the programs that we might have to offer, that when the individual approaches the department they have a full knowledge given to them as to what they actually have available to them.

I think if we do that we will have the buy-in of those individuals who come to us for help. When they buy in, I think what will happen is they will start to begin to see a government that is actually working for the people and then they will begin to believe in themselves and believe in the systems and supports that we put in place and therefore, I believe, leading them out of poverty. But that takes a conscious effort and I believe it starts with the front line. I'll just leave you with that comment.

MS. MARGARET MACDONALD: Could I make a comment? It's a personal observation and again, I'm probably just a bit of a novice in this world but I did go around to some of the field offices last year, mostly visiting Labour and Workforce Development. What I found is, it was sort of bits and pieces, but you could see the continuum, the work that was done between Community Services, and Labour and Workforce Development, particularly in the adult education program. At the front-line level, I was really quite impressed about the collaboration that was going on there.

Then I attended a couple of graduations. So you see these young people essentially walking across the stage, they're getting their high school diploma and you say, what's next? And 50 per cent, at least, are saying, well, I'm already enrolled in a program at the community college and I'm moving on. What really struck me is that in a lot of ways the front-line people are already doing it and they're doing it in the best way that they can, right now. So it really struck me that there's a lot that we could be doing to support what they are already trying to do out there.

I guess I just want to say that I totally recognize what you're saying and I think I respect what's happening on the front lines. So there's a whole lot we need to do to move up to meet where they are right now.

MR. ZINCK: I'll agree with you that there are some good things happening.

MS. MARGARET MACDONALD: I didn't mean to suggest that there are none. I'm just using that as an example that there are great things to build on.

MR. ZINCK: Absolutely.

MR. CHAIRMAN: We're running out of time, so I think I'd like to move on to Mr. d'Entremont for probably what will be a final question.

HON. CHRISTOPHER D'ENTREMONT: Thanks. This is just a two-prong - I could ask a bunch of questions around housing, but I'll wait until we have the housing presentation.

My two questions revolve around the coordinator. We talked about the hiring of the coordinator - who is the coordinator and when are we going to have a chance to meet him or her? Also when it comes to ESIA redesign, how far out are we going to see a framework for this? Eventually, everything is going to be on the table but you're going to have to draw a line at some point where that's going to be and when a framework is going to be in place. So the coordinator, who is it and when are we going to meet them; and the EISA redesign, how far out are we going to see a framework?

MS. FERGUSON: The coordinator's name is Ulrich vom Hagen and he has been recently hired and we anticipate that we'll bring him with us in December.

MR. D'ENTREMONT: Okay.

MS. FERGUSON: Just so I make sure I understand your second question, in terms of a framework?

MR. D'ENTREMONT: Yes, I'm just saying that if everything is on the table - we know that everything can't remain on the table so if we're going to redesign ESIA, we're going to have to have a framework that everybody can live with. Where is that? We know that ESIA redesign is going to take two or three years to really get there, but we need to have an idea of where we're looking and how we're going to do it. Are we thinking of a framework?

MS. FERGUSON: Yes, we are thinking about a framework and that's one of the things that we'll be talking to the ministerial committee about, absolutely.

MR. D'ENTREMONT: Okay.

MR. CHAIRMAN: That may give us a moment - Michele, who is on my list.

MS. MICHELE RAYMOND: Thank you very much. I realize this is a huge issue. One of the things, as I think you'll know, that I have some concerns about is the ways in which the department, particularly with ESIA, goes about ensuring the quality of the services that it pays to have delivered. I tend to think particularly in terms of housing and ensuring that, in fact, housing does meet the definition of housing when it is something that the department pays for for its recipients. Has there been any consideration of engaging Service Nova Scotia and Municipal Relations because of its role with residential tenancies?

MS. FERGUSON: In terms of ESIA redesign?

MS. RAYMOND: Yes, and as I say, ensuring the quality of the services that are provided. I mean one needs to ensure that obviously child care meets acceptable levels and so on, that the department doesn't simply say okay, this has been done, we have given money to a landlord, we have given money to a child care provider. But specifically in the housing context, is there any thought of engaging Service Nova Scotia and Municipal

Relations and residential tenancies? It can be very, very difficult for people to actually advocate for themselves.

[11:00 a.m.]

MS. FERGUSON: We will be consulting with a number of other departments through ESIA redesign. Some departments actually will sit on a number of committees. I don't recall, I don't believe that Service Nova Scotia and Municipal Relations is on that core group of other departments. Having said that, though, we know that we're going to have to go out and talk to a number of other departments as issues come up. Whether that issue is looked at through ESIA redesign or as we start to look at our housing strategy, there will be opportunities for us to liaise directly with Service Nova Scotia and Municipal Relations.

You've raised those concerns, we've brought those to our housing staff, so as we move this piece of work forward, we'll have opportunities to talk about that. I'm just not sure at this stage whether that will be part of the ESIA redesign focus or as we start to move through the housing strategy. But we are aware of the concerns and we will address those through one of those processes.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Well, on that note, I think what I'd like to do is assume that we've reached kind of a pause in our discussion. We've run out of time. Our next meeting is scheduled for Tuesday, December 1st at 1:00 p.m., so between 1:00 p.m. and 3:00 p.m. We will be meeting again on the same theme and we'll be able to pursue this discussion.

So I'd like to thank you all for being here this morning and helping us understand the work that you're engaged in. It was very helpful and we look forward to seeing you again in a month.

Thank you everyone, the meeting is adjourned.

[The committee adjourned at 11:02 a.m.]