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COMMITTEE

ON

COMMUNITY SERVICES

Tuesday, May 4, 2010

Committee Room 1

Nova Scotia Disabled Persons Commission

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COMMUNITY SERVICES COMMITTEE

Mr. Jim Morton (Chairman)
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Ms. Michele Raymond
Mr. Maurice Smith
Mr. Leo Glavine
Ms. Kelly Regan
Hon. Chris d'Entremont
Mr. Alfie MacLeod

[Mr. Leonard Preyra was replaced by Ms. Vicki Conrad.]

In Attendance:

Ms. Kim Langille
Legislative Committee Clerk

WITNESSES

Nova Scotia Disabled Persons Commission

Ms. Anne MacRae,
Executive Director

Mr. Brian Tapper,
Chair

Mr. Burke MacCallum,
Researcher

Mr. Craig MacKinnon,
Researcher

HALIFAX, TUESDAY, MAY 4, 2010

STANDING COMMITTEE ON COMMUNITY SERVICES

10:00 A.M.

CHAIRMAN
Mr. Jim Morton

MR. CHAIRMAN: It's time to call us back to order. Again, time is pressing, and I know that we're now a couple of minutes past 10:00 a.m.

I'd like to welcome the Nova Scotia Disabled Persons Commission. I think I'll start by just introducing Anne MacRae, the Executive Director, and welcome, Anne. Would you be willing to introduce the members of your group?

MS. ANNE MACRAE: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. We're delighted to be here today. I have with me my Chair, Brian Tapper, and Burke MacCallum, who is our research officer, and Craig MacKinnon, our other research officer.

So Brian is going to start and give a bit of an overview of the commission itself, and then I'll talk for a few minutes about some of the initiatives and projects and whatnot that we have underway.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Great. Thank you very much, and welcome, all of you.

MR. BRIAN TAPPER: Mr. Chairman, members of the committee, it is my pleasure to be here, and in the next five minutes or so I'm going to give you a snapshot of the Disabled Persons Commission. The Disabled Persons Commission was established in 1989 and is governed by the Disabled Persons Act.

Under the Disabled Persons Act, it provides an opportunity for persons with disabilities to have a role in the development of government policies and programs that affect persons with disabilities. It provides a central place for the concerns of persons with disabilities to be shared and passed on to the appropriate provincial government departments. It provides an opportunity for provincial government departments to make the disabled community aware of policies, programs and services that they are developing for persons with disabilities.

Nova Scotia has the highest prevalence of disability of any province in the country and if you look at a 2001 participation in activity limitation survey done by Statistics Canada and 2006, you'll see that presently in Nova Scotia one in five Nova Scotians identifies themselves as living with a disability.

The Disabled Persons' Commission has 12 members - seven members are disability community representatives and five members are departmental representatives. When you look at the composition of the commission, we have members from Yarmouth, Wolfville, Halifax, Truro, Pictou and Sydney. When you look at government representation, we have members from the Nova Scotia Department of Community Services, Education, Health, Labour and Workforce Development, Service Nova Scotia and Municipal Relations.

Through the Disabled Persons' Act - the legislation that governs us - we report to a coordinating committee of ministers and we strive to meet twice a year. This provides an opportunity to advise five ministers on issues of importance to the persons with disabilities in Nova Scotia. It provides ministers an opportunity to educate the commission on programs and services.

When you look at our vision, our vision is to be a leader in areas of education and awareness, accessibility, research and policy analysis, and the employability of Nova Scotians with disabilities. When you look at our mission, our mission is to support the social and economic inclusion of Nova Scotians with disabilities. When you look at our values, our values are the inclusion of people with disabilities as active decision makers at all levels of government and in the corporate and voluntary sector. It's equal opportunity and universal access to the physical environment, services and information for people with disabilities, and it's the recognition that people with disabilities make valuable contributions to a healthy, diverse society.

MS. MACRAE: I'm just going to talk briefly about some of the priority areas that we're currently involved with. Because we're a fairly small organization, we've had to really try to decide on what sort of key priority areas we could deal with. So as you can see, there are five of them: improving our administrative capacity; probably the biggest area that we focus on is creating information - creating awareness and education around disability issues. We're also involved with issues related to building and dwelling accessibility. Another key area for us is research policy analysis and partnership development related to disability supports. The last one, of course, is the employability of

people with disabilities. So I'm going to go over each of these briefly with you and just give you a few ideas around what it is that we focus our time on.

In terms of the administrative capacity of the commission, we have four staff - three of them are here today, and then we have an administrative assistant who's holding down the shop today. We have an annual budget of about \$400,000 and about \$130,000 of that is for operating expenses and the rest is salaries.

As I said earlier, the area that we probably focus on the most is information, education and awareness. I know in the information that I gave to Kim, we've given you a copy of our *Are You Ready?* booklet, which is a booklet that we developed with many of our community partners around emergency preparedness. I brought it today because this is Emergency Preparedness Week, and we're doing a fair amount of work with EMO and other organizations, to now take that booklet and develop it into a train the trainer model that will allow organizations representing people with disabilities to get some of their members trained, who can then go out and educate their members about what their responsibilities are - as people with disabilities - to be prepared in the event of an emergency. As we all know, we have to be prepared for 72 hours and the booklet just gives them tips, depending on the nature of your disability, the kinds of things you should have in your kit, and how you can make sure that you are best prepared.

We also are very much involved with developing statistical manuals. I didn't bring those with us today but we will send them over to you. We are in the course of getting one of them printed. We have two so far - one is a general snapshot on disability in the province and the other that is just in the process of being printed is on unemployment. This year we plan to do three more. We want to focus on issues related to women, issues related to education, and I think the third one we are hoping to do is disability supports. All that is based on taking the PALS data from the PALS centres, and then Burke and Craig do their wizardry, in terms of analyzing that information to make sense for Nova Scotians.

We're also very much involved with a couple of awareness activities, if you will. Access Awareness Week is coming up the first week of June, and we're very busy right now with a lot of our partners to develop events that people with disabilities, and others, will be able to participate in. One that we are very much involved with is a breakfast. We're hoping many of you will attend and Jim, your invitation should be in the mail soon. It is just an opportunity for people with disabilities, and members of government, and others to get together to celebrate the week, celebrate the strides we're making in terms of access. Other events will happen as well during the week.

We are also very much involved with December 3rd, which is the International Day of Persons With Disabilities. This year - again with our partners, the Human Rights Commission and the CPN network - we're creating a two-day symposium that will deal with the issues related to education and employment.

Our second area that we deal a lot with is building and dwelling accessibility. This is mainly focussed on the commitment the government has made to make all its buildings accessible by 2020, so we work with government on that particular initiative. In addition, one of our board members is very keen on the issue of visitability, which is a concept that has taken off in some countries like England - how does a building need to be visitable? - which means that at least one entrance has to be accessible to people with disabilities, wider hallways, a washroom that is accessible. When you build these houses from the get-go, the increased costs are very minimal but, as a result, not only can people live in the homes but family and friends who have disabilities can visit.

In terms of research policy analysis and partnerships, this is another key area where we work a lot with disability organizations and government to improve access for people with disabilities. Some of the initiatives that we're working on - Lorna was talking earlier about the work that they're doing around respite. Lorna has been working with us on a committee that is made up mostly of parents of children with disabilities.

A lot of us wear different hats. As the Executive Director of the Disabled Persons Commission, I also have a son with a disability and a lot of the people around the table are very much in that same boat, and we work very closely with the IWK as well. We've developed a series of recommendations that we're working on with Lorna and others, to provide access to respite care for families in the province.

We are also working with the disabled community and, again, Lorna and others to look at developing a disability strategy for the province that will take a holistic approach to disability. Burke and Craig are also working very closely with the Department of Community Services to figure out how we can improve income assistance for Nova Scotians and, again, looking at statistics and who are the people most in need and how can we best serve them.

Recently we've been working with the Department of Health Promotion and Protection around the very successful games in Vancouver and the upcoming games here in Nova Scotia with the Canada Games. Figuring out how can we ensure there's a legacy here in Nova Scotia for kids and adults to be involved in recreational pursuits in the province.

You also heard earlier about the wheelchair program and how successful that program is. We've been working very closely with the department and Easter Seals to look at ways to improve that program, particularly around expanding it to include seniors with disabilities.

That just gives you a bit of an idea of some of the issues that we're currently working on but it's a very small number, there's a list. Last but not least is employability of persons with disabilities and looking at ways to promote a continuum of employment opportunities for persons with disabilities, which would include paid employment, self-employment, supported employment and volunteering.

[10:15 a.m.]

We're very much involved with the employability table that is currently working on developing a labour market strategy for persons with disabilities and we're very excited about the work that table is doing. Again, the Department of Community Services, the Department of Labour and Workforce Development, the Department of Education and the Department of Health Promotion and Protection are all sitting at that table as well.

As Brian said, with one in five people in Nova Scotia having a disability, this is a key sector for government to be looking at in terms of dealing with the labour shortage that we're currently working with. That gives you just a bit of an idea and we're very happy to take questions and I hope I didn't talk too long.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Thank you, Ms MacRae and I know that we've given you a very little bit of time and it has created some pressure and I just want to acknowledge that. I know there are questions and we have about 13 minutes to deal with those until we make the next move. Mr. Glavine, if you're interested in asking the first question, it's yours.

MR. LEO GLAVINE: I'm interested to know if you have done any research around why Nova Scotia has this high rate, looking at one in five, roughly 20 per cent of the population. Is there an area of disability that seems to be much more pronounced in our province compared to a national average? That in some sense may give us some help and direction as to where we need to be going in this area.

MR. BURKE MACCALLUM: Seven years ago, during the first - I believe it was the 1991 Howe's data that was developed by Statistics Canada on the province, we did a study looking at disability right across the province. It has been since the beginning of the Howe's project with Statistics Canada, Nova Scotia has been the highest rate and we were interested in trying to find out why that was so and whether it was higher in particular regions of the province and it is. From that data, we learned that Cape Breton has a very high rate. At that time, it was up in 30 per cent and along the South Shore there was a pocket of high rates. Disability is not uniformly distributed throughout the province, 20 per cent is clearly an average of the provincial rate.

Why the rate is high, that is a really good question. We know that we have high respiratory and cancer rates in Cape Breton, which is a result of industrial work in the province due to coal mining and steel smelting. We have high rates of particular types of disabilities around the South Shore, which is probably genetic factors, but beyond that we do not know because Statistics Canada does not collect data on actual causality or etiology of disability. The last time that we could do that work - I did that, as I say, about 1991, 1992, 1993 - Statistics Canada cut the sample size for the province.

What that meant was the collection of data was so small that we couldn't get data for the county level because of the possibility of identification. So right now, Statistics Canada will not give you data below Nova Scotia level, so we can't look at particular areas

of the province to find out those rates currently, but I still would suspect that they are higher in Cape Breton and along the South Shore.

MR. GLAVINE: Just a quick little follow-up - what about in terms of physical disabilities versus genetic and mental disabilities? Is there some area that's more pronounced than another in terms of disability?

MR. MACCALLUM: For a type of disability?

MR. GLAVINE: For a type, yes.

MR. MACCALLUM: Yes, the leading ones right now, according to the last 2006 data - mobility disability and pain as a disability have the highest rates in the province.

MR. GLAVINE: Good, thank you.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Thank you, Mr. Glavine. If members could maybe confine themselves to one question given the brevity of time?

MR. MACCALLUM: We just wanted to say on that last question, too, we have a statistics manual we're putting up on our Web site, and we'll be happy to flip over to you. It has most of that information. (Interruptions)

MR. CHAIRMAN: Mr. Ramey.

MR. GARY RAMEY: Thank you very much, and thank you all for coming. Just a comment in relation to what my colleague - the member for Kings West - was asking, because I have to say that was obviously going to be one of my questions as well, just in relation to the South Shore from which I come. I do know in that area as well there have been a lot of people employed over the years in the primary resource industries. I'm thinking forestry and fishing, in particular, but others as well. I know there have been - you know, we haven't always had the safest working environments in past years in some of those sectors, and I wouldn't doubt that there may be something related there.

All of us, obviously, are interested in having an inclusive society where everybody gets a fair shake - I think that goes without saying. So I guess my question is a fairly general one, but I'm interested in what you have to say about it, and that is what do you think - I mean, I've looked at the presentation here, but what do you think is the single biggest issue facing people with disabilities in this province right now, the single biggest one? I know there are all kinds of them.

MS. MACRAE: It's a very good question because we were talking about this in the office yesterday as we were preparing to come here. We were thinking about questions that we should be prepared to answer, and that was exactly one of the ones we were coming up with and they were saying, well, how would you pick one?

MR. RAMEY: Yes.

MS. MACRAE: But when we discussed it, we thought really one of the key issues that needs to be addressed is transportation.

MR. RAMEY: Okay, I thought you might say that. I did.

MS. MACRAE: There are many, but if you have access to transportation, especially with the kind of province that we have where so many people live in rural areas, the Dial-A-Ride program and the CTAP/ATAP funding is fantastic. That's allowing community-based transportation systems to get off the ground and start working. As you know, Claredon Robichaud runs a great program down the South Shore, and we know of many others across the province. Some of them are doing very creative things around ensuring that these transportation systems stay viable, but they're key to enhancing services for people with disabilities.

MR. RAMEY: I have more, but I know I can't ask them.

MR. CHAIRMAN: That's right. (Interruptions) Very intuitive. Ms. Raymond.

MS. MICHELE RAYMOND: Thank you very much, and lots of questions, of course.

MR. CHAIRMAN: But only an opportunity for one.

MS. RAYMOND: I'm very interested in the question about disability rates. I'm not surprised to find that a lot of those are, in fact, acquired disabilities, and that mobility disabilities prevail - probably vision impairment, as well. Given that, I'm just wondering - and the challenges that surround making government buildings accessible and so on, and as well as housing accessibility and the visibility comments. I'm just wondering first of all whether transportation infrastructure is involved or can be involved as one of your ministerial partners in this commission, to ensure accessibility in design of buildings?

Secondly, do you know if there is any initiative to promote the flex housing concept that CMHC was promoting some years ago that housing should be designed in such a way that doorways can be widened, bathrooms, counters raised and lowered, I'm not sure what the status is here.

MS. MACRAE: Flex housing is very similar to what I was talking about earlier, around visitability.

MS. RAYMOND: Is there a formal mandate or initiative that subsidies should give preferential treatment to flex housing type of design?

MS. MACRAE: Sorry, I didn't catch the question.

MS. RAYMOND: Is there any formal initiative that new, affordable housing should incorporate flex housing design, do you know? I don't know.

MS. MACRAE: I think in terms of the province, in terms of some of the housing they're currently involved with, they make sure that a certain number of their units are barrier free and accessible. What we're talking about is more the housing industry per se, in terms of single dwelling homes. I think Burke can probably speak better to this than I can about the building code, but my understanding right now is the building code doesn't really cover that. Is that correct?

MR. MACCALLUM: The building code doesn't cover private housing. Flex issues which are CMHA based are, as Ann is saying, very close to the visitability concept. About three or four years ago, we worked with the Department of Community Services under housing to develop some affordable housing and they were made visitable. There was a small up cost for that but, as you are probably aware, flex housing is not a huge addition in the cost of developing housing. It allows the home to be developed later on, if necessary, to become accessible. It's a key feature, we promote that issue.

MS. RAYMOND: The whole Aging in Place concept.

MR. MACCALLUM: We also work with the Department of Transportation and Infrastructure Renewal and we've been working for years trying to make government buildings more accessible. As you know, they're grandfathered in under the Building Code Act but with a building code coordinator, Ted Ross, we've been working for years on that issue. We're trying to get the budget increased - there is a good-sized budget for this year for making buildings accessible, but it is a huge endeavour, as you know. There are many buildings across the province that are not up to code - the Dennis Building, for example. There's a huge elevator.

MS. RAYMOND: Thank you.

MR. CHAIRMAN: I think that leaves us time for one more brief question. Mr. Smith.

MR. MAURICE SMITH: Does the province, the government, have a policy that supports hiring of disabled persons in its hiring practices?

MS. MACRAE: Yes, they have a fair hiring policy and they have the employment equity. They do have programs and services that promote the hiring of people with disabilities.

MR. SMITH: So if somebody has a disability, they should make sure that is noted when they make an application for a position with government?

MS. MACRAE: Yes, when they apply. So for example, when I applied for this job, I had self-identified as a person with disability, so if you self-identify then they would be known as being a person with a disability.

MR. TAPPER: And I would add to that fair hiring practice that they've had a good practice of providing technical aids to people who are currently in the workplace and become disabled or are hired and require an aid. So the fair hiring practices included the provision of an aid.

MS. MACRAE: So for example, I'm quite profoundly hard of hearing and when I got this job, Charlie MacDonald is the steward of the accommodation fund. I just had to call him up and say look, I'm going to need equipment. He said, let me know what you need and had to get three quotes, he approved it and I got my equipment. So it's a very good program and it levels the playing field for sure.

MR. SMITH: Thank you.

MR. CHAIRMAN: I think that brings us close enough to the end of our time that we need to stop there. Ms. MacRae, are there any final words that any member of your team would like to make?

MS. MACRAE: No. Thanks very much for having us come this week - we can come again and give more detail on specific programs. We would love to.

MR. TAPPER: There is just one observation that I would make in the context of the employability of persons with disabilities - the number one in five, I think, is significant, but when you look at that population 60 per cent of those people are working age and it is really important in a time of skill shortage that we have an opportunity here to help people become attached to the workforce. That would be my last comment.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Well, thank you all again for being here. We really appreciate the time you have taken, and I know that this is a very quick snapshot of the important work that you're doing.

[10:29 a.m. The committee recessed.]