

HANSARD

NOVA SCOTIA HOUSE OF ASSEMBLY

COMMITTEE

ON

COMMUNITY SERVICES

Tuesday, November 1, 2011

Committee Room 1

Organizational Meeting

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COMMUNITY SERVICES COMMITTEE

Mr. Jim Morton (Chairman)
Mr. Gary Ramey (Vice-Chairman)
Mr. Sid Prest
Mr. Gary Burrill
Mr. Brian Skabar
Hon. Karen Casey
Ms. Kelly Regan
Mr. Keith Bain
Mr. Eddie Orrell

In Attendance:

Ms. Kim Langille
Legislative Committee Clerk

HALIFAX, TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 1, 2011

STANDING COMMITTEE ON COMMUNITY SERVICES

9:00 A.M.

CHAIRMAN
Mr. Jim Morton

MR. CHAIRMAN: Good morning everyone, welcome to the Standing Committee on Community Services. I don't know if we need introductions for ourselves this morning but it's typical that we do so, I think we'll do that for the record in any case.

[The committee members introduced themselves.]

MR. CHAIRMAN: Thank you. We were intending to have, I think, what might have been a full and long meeting this morning but our witnesses quite recently determined that they were not ready to come. We had correspondence from Dalhousie Legal Aid, from Nova Scotia Legal Aid, withdrawing their interest in appearing today. Subsequent to that, the Department of Community Services, which was also scheduled to be here, wrote to tell us that they were not interested in coming.

My understanding is that both legal aid groups and the Department of Community Services have been in some discussions which are continuing and I think that probably accounts for the decision to postpone at least this appearance here. I use the word "postpone" maybe not quite accurately at this point. My understanding with all of those groups is if there was an interest in returning, they would be in touch with us to let us know that but there is no understanding of a date that they would come back. That's where things stand at this moment.

HON. KAREN CASEY: Am I understanding that even if we extended the invitation again, they might decline? They are not postponing it, they are saying no, if they want to come back that they will, on their own initiative?

MR. CHAIRMAN: Yes, that's right. I've had some conversations and I see the correspondence, the kind of message that I certainly left with the Legal Aid people is if they are interested in coming back, they should be in touch with the clerk to signal that and that given the mood and discussions that we've had here before, I would guess that they would be welcome. The next move is theirs, as I understand it. We didn't ask them not to come, they told us they were not in a position to come at this point.

MR. KEITH BAIN: Mr. Chairman, would it still be advisable to have the Department of Community Services here? They were the ones who wanted to appear. Once Nova Scotia Legal Aid and Dal Legal Aid were going to appear, they wanted to present the changes. Can we not get them back to go into it?

MR. CHAIRMAN: That's an interesting point. We checked with them yesterday just to clarify the process. As of yesterday morning, they were still, to the clerk's knowledge and to my knowledge, planning to appear. When we checked in to confirm with them, they determined they thought it was not useful for them to appear at this point because they were still in discussions with Dal Legal Aid and Nova Scotia Legal Aid.

MR. BAIN: I'm sorry, I brought that up because it might be interesting for us, as committee members, to hear what the changes are anyway, so that we're on top of it. It's not something that has to happen right away but it might be interesting to hear it later.

MS. KELLY REGAN: I would just like to say that while it may not be useful to them to appear, it might be useful to us to have them appear, since we would like to have some of the information around these changes clarified. Quite frankly, I'm quite disturbed that they cancelled out because they seemed to really want to come and we moved things around. I'm quite disturbed that all three groups did. This is the second time that the legal aid societies have cancelled out on us.

MR. CHAIRMAN: I think the fact that the arrangement that we had, I think, created a level of inconvenience both for ourselves and for other groups that may wish to be here. I think having people who might show is not such a great thing.

Our purpose this morning, however, is to set agenda items into the future and so I think that opportunity to determine that we would want the Department of Community Services to be here is something that we can entertain. Just casting my own mind back to our previous discussion, as we discussed possibilities of who might be here and who might not be, we had a fair number of discussions about whether the Department of Community Services should be here when the legal aid groups are here and so on. I think there was a sense that, at least in my mind - maybe perhaps also in the Department of Community Services' collective minds - that appearing here was in conjunction with the legal aid groups as kind of a joint presentation; not all at the same time but something that would happen in sequence during one meeting.

Having said that, our purpose today is to set items for our future agenda and the floor is open for that.

MS. REGAN: I think at least some of the Opposition members made it quite clear we didn't think they should be appearing together, that it should have been separate occasions. I think we made that pretty clear.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Yes, you did. I agree with that.

MS. REGAN: While that may have been in their minds, it certainly was not in all of ours.

MR. CHAIRMAN: In any case, I think this discussion is just about the background of why we're focused on agenda today and not on the witnesses that we had intended to interview. You'll see before you today's agenda as it stands; first Committee Business and Selection of Witnesses. In light of that, there are several pieces of correspondence that have been received. We received an item from Cape Breton's Family Place Resource Centre pointing out that a document that had been distributed, *Contributing to Community Change - An Early Years Action Plan Road Map*, had been attributed to the Family Service of Eastern Nova Scotia and it should not have been. That's more a point of clarification.

We have a letter from Alice Housing asking if they could appear before us. I can't recall if we discussed that here before - I see the clerk shaking her head, so we haven't. Alice Housing provides safe second-stage housing and supportive counselling for women and children leaving domestic violence. I think that's located in HRM. Am I correct about that? I see nods of heads. We had correspondence, as I've already mentioned, from Dalhousie Legal Aid and from the Department of Community Services indicating that they were not ready to appear today.

If we look at the next meeting - just to clarify where we're at - Dartmouth Adult Services Centre is scheduled to appear before us. That witness has been kind of scheduled for some time. We bumped them from today to the next meeting. The plan for the next meeting, assuming the House is in session, is that we would meet in the morning. It appears to me that at this point, I guess, it's a little bit difficult to know whether the House will still be sitting on that date, it may not be. If we, in fact, understand a week ahead of time that if the House is still in session, a week before on December 6th, I think my recommendation would be that we hold to the morning meeting time just to be respectful to the witnesses. Is that an acceptable arrangement, so that we're not left indecisive? Okay.

With that long preamble, maybe I can take us back to selecting witnesses. I think you all have in front of you the three-colour document, which indicates ideas that we had submitted in the past and that might be a tool that can be used. There may be other, newer ideas, some that have already been mentioned this morning that we want to consider. I'll turn the floor over to members of the committee for suggestions.

MR. GARY BURRILL: I think that the federal standing committee's epic study published earlier this year, or at the tail end of last year, is really setting a lot of the tone for policy thinking about community services-related matters nationally. It is a very important document. Of particular importance is its recommendation for the establishment of a program of guaranteed income in the area of disabled support.

I think it would be useful for us to hear from one or more of the authors of that report, in a general way, but in a particular way about what is really kind of the signature new piece of that document so I'd recommend that for our agenda.

MR. CHAIRMAN: There has been a suggestion made. I think what I'll do is simply open the floor to see what kind of interest there is in moving forward with that. I saw a nod, I saw several nods at this point so I think there's an agreement that we would seek to find witnesses - are there witnesses in particular that you would identify, Mr. Burrill?

MR. BURRILL: It's an all-Party report but there wasn't anyone I had in mind specifically. I can't say the name of the author of the report, the chairman of that committee, but that would probably be the best person.

MR. CHAIRMAN: So perhaps approaching the chairman and determining who should be here or if they would agree to come, ok.

MR. GARY RAMEY: Mr. Chairman, it's my understanding, and please correct me if I have this wrong because I may well have, it was some time ago we had the Mount Saint Vincent people in here discussing food and food-related matters. It was my understanding that there was some kind of communication or correspondence of some kind that came from the Retail Council of Canada or something - the grocery people - they wanted to comment on that and see us about something. I have no idea what they wanted to talk about but I would be interested in knowing what they want to talk about and what their spin would be on what they heard there. I would be interested in hearing from them.

I think it was the Retail Council, and I don't know enough about what they wanted to do but I would be interested in hearing if that would be something that others would be interested in.

MR. CHAIRMAN: My memory is that we received two letters from the Retail Council of Canada commenting. Our meeting with the Mount Saint Vincent folks caught their attention and led them to offer some observations on their own experience. It certainly occurred to me at that time that that might add another perspective.

MS. CASEY: I think that would perhaps give us a balance of two different perspectives on the same issue and if we did catch their attention with the other report, then they deserve an opportunity to give us their perspective.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Just to be clear, they didn't invite themselves or suggest that they wanted to be here . . .

MS. CASEY: I'm suggesting that we invite them.

MR. CHAIRMAN: They may decline, I suppose, but we could invite them.

MS. CASEY: Others have done that.

MR. CHAIRMAN: I think I was seeing nods of heads. I don't know if I saw them but there appeared to be, so I think we've got another item.

I don't know how far ahead we want to go. That would take us, I guess, to February anyway, but I see Ms. Regan's finger in the air. Her index finger, just to be clear. (Laughter)

MS. REGAN: I do think it would be a good idea to hear from Alice Housing since they have requested to appear before us.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Alice Housing has been proposed and they have requested that. Any thoughts about that?

MR. RAMEY: That's certainly fine with me.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Okay, I think we've got it. I can see the majority of nods, so Alice Housing.

MS. CASEY: I don't know if we can do this or not but a couple of these certainly relate to poverty and food and the cost of food and availability of food and so on. I understand that Feed Nova Scotia is doing a bit of a survey now. Would it be important to hear what the results of their findings might be because, again, that's related to food availability for people with some financial challenges? Could we have more than one witness - if we are going to take one day or one committee meeting, could we have two witnesses about the same topic on that agenda, and would Feed Nova Scotia be one of them? I'm just throwing it out there for a reaction.

MR. CHAIRMAN: It might be interesting to see how the Retail Council of Canada and Feed Nova Scotia . . .

MS. CASEY: I guess I'm thinking if we're talking about the issue, which is what we're going to find out about, the issue and all sides of it, maybe we should hear all sides of it.

MR. CHAIRMAN: So having Feed Nova Scotia as a witness has been suggested. Are there comments, thoughts? Again, I'm hearing yes, okay.

The clerk is wondering how we might schedule that. Would there be an interest, a willingness to look at the Retail Council of Canada and Feed Nova Scotia as one meeting - two witnesses on the same day?

MS. CASEY: That would be my suggestion since it's the same topic. If we can structure the time so that they each have their own allotted time so that we hear both sides, both messages.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Okay. Have we gone far enough? Are there other suggestions that anybody would like to advance at this point? I guess I want to read the thinking of the committee.

MR. BRIAN SKABAR: Would the prior learning assessment be part of the mandate of this committee or would that be a different - the PLA?

MR. CHAIRMAN: Prior learning assessment, well, it certainly has relevance to the world of social services.

MR. SKABAR: Well, social services and community and employment and a furtherance of - you know, community college education.

MR. CHAIRMAN: There is a pilot occurring at this point, I think.

MR. RAMEY: Mr. Chairman, it's used by colleges as one example of taking people who already have experience in some area and rather than making them reinvent the wheel, if they want to go on and, let's say, take a program at the community college to improve their chances of employment or whatever, they often then, through PLA - prior learning assessment - they do not have to go back and reinvent the wheel.

For instance, if you can type at some ridiculous speed and you were taking a program that had as part of it keyboarding, you would not be taking keyboarding if you could already do that, so it would be PLA'd through. To that extent it would help people who are - let's say they might be on Community Services now, or receiving Community Services funding, it would help in their retraining or even perhaps in acquiring employment if they went through the PLA system.

I mean if there's any connection - I agree, somebody mentioned it's education. It is, it spills over into a whole bunch of different areas. Community Services clients would be one group that would benefit from that but there are lots of other people perhaps, too, who would.

MR. CHAIRMAN: So Mr. Skabar raised this, are you proposing that we . . .

MR. SKABAR: I would propose it, yes.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Is there an interest in having a look at it?

MS. REGAN: I've actually been to see that. I used to be on the Human Resources Committee, it really is connected to the Human Resources Committee and its mandate as opposed to ours. I would suggest that the Human Resources Committee should absolutely be hearing from them. I think it's a great idea, I'm just not sure it's . . .

MR. SKABAR: I'm on Human Resources, as well, so I will submit it as an agenda item there. (Laughter) There you go, because I'm quite interested in it.

MR. CHAIRMAN: So you're going to take it that route, Mr. Skabar? Okay, thank you both for that.

Am I reading that we've reached - Ms. Casey.

MS. CASEY: I'm not trying to prolong this but our initial discussion talked about Community Services. Do we want to invite Community Services to come back? They are suggesting not at this time so is there another time? Do we want to extend an invitation to them again, to come back?

MR. CHAIRMAN: For the specific purpose of talking about special needs?

MS. CASEY: Yes, and if the delay or the postponement was because of the negotiations and the talks that are going on, when those talks are finished, if that is why they didn't want to come, when those are finished could we ask them to come back? I think there was a desire to have them here, I think some of us still have that desire.

MR. CHAIRMAN: So the proposal has been made to invite the Department of Community Services to come back at a future date, what is your thinking? Mr. Burrill had his finger, the index finger, in the air.

MR. BURRILL: The context for their being here was a contention over this question with the legal aid services. The sense was that a side or the other side, another side of the matter being presented as we try to weigh the different sides of this contention. I'm not sure what would be advanced by hearing the department - and I recognize in saying this that I'm echoing a position that had been taken by my friends, really, we were discussing this earlier - what would be advanced by hearing from the department about this, independently of the context of that contention?

In other words, it seems to me that the value to our purposes of hearing from the department was really the context of their, in effect, being held to account for points being made by Nova Scotia Legal Aid and Dal Legal Aid. I'm less enthusiastic about having the department here, outside of the context of the legal aid services.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Mr. Bain, I think, first.

MR. BAIN: Thanks, Mr. Chairman. I think it's important that we have the department here because we're talking about, as it says, regulation changes relating to special needs assessment, so there are changes. I think for just the education of this committee, if nothing else, that we fully understand what those changes are because we will be affected, in the long term, anyway.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Ms. Regan.

MS. REGAN: I think it's important for us to know what the changes are. I mean, how can we deal with constituents if we don't fully know what the changes are? We've heard varying versions of what happened and what it means, et cetera. I'd like to know what it is that we're dealing with when we're calling up Community Services.

Dal Legal Aid, Nova Scotia Legal Aid are in communication, apparently, they are in negotiations. When these are concluded, we just want to know what has been decided. How can we do our jobs if we don't have that piece of information?

MR. CHAIRMAN: Any other comments? So I'm hearing some interest, I've heard some reservation. I think what I will be hearing is that if we were looking at Community Services that we might add it to the list, assuming that as things evolve, there may well be a reason to invite them to come but perhaps we could put it kind of at the later stage of our list, as opposed to early on. Would that be an acceptable way to think about this? Ms. Casey.

MS. CASEY: I don't think there's any reservation about whether we want them or not. What I was suggesting was, if their reason for declining now is because they are in some kind of negotiations, that we would respect that. When those negotiations are finished, we would invite them to come back.

MR. CHAIRMAN: I think that sounds like a reasonable thing. Maybe what we need to do, as a committee, is monitor that process and determine at what point we'd like them back. Whether those negotiations will take a month or four months, I don't know at this point.

MR. SKABAR: Well, even on a go-forward basis, to have this committee hear from Community Services on a regular or quasi-regular basis is my idea of what we should be doing anyway.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Maybe that's a good thought. So at this point we have our meeting planned for December. I think that would mean we would have January, February and March, perhaps, filled with the topics we've already selected. Maybe we could look at April for Community Services and kind of fine-tune as we get a little closer - Ms. Regan, who is waving her finger now. (Laughter)

MS. REGAN: Actually, I think it makes sense to have the Community Services Department in on a regular basis to discuss different programs. They don't have to do the full-meal-deal every time they come in but if they came in and discussed a different program in-depth, I think that would give us more tools, a deeper understanding, and a better ability to do our jobs.

I would suggest that we have them in at least twice a year, possibly more, to discuss various things so we understand how their programs work.

MR. CHAIRMAN: I think we have agreement on that. I'm seeing nods and flickers of eyelids and the like. I think that surely puts us far enough into the future to have done our task for this morning. Mr. Bain has a comment.

MR. BAIN: Mr. Chairman, I just wonder about our January meeting. Normally we meet the first Tuesday of the month and in January the first Tuesday is the day after our holiday, so I'd like to make a suggestion that we postpone that meeting until January 10th.

MR. CHAIRMAN: I think that's a wonderful suggestion. Great minds think alike - the clerk and Mr. Bain were both speaking at the same moment about the same thing. The clerk was reminding me that . . .

MR. BAIN: And I didn't even call you, Kim, did I? (Laughter)

MR. CHAIRMAN: It was an independent thought, Mr. Bain, and much appreciated. So although the clerk was reminding me that if we are to move to January 10th, we do need to meet in the afternoon. There is another meeting in this room in the morning. I think our usual time would be 1:00 p.m. and that's a problem for some of us. However, I think probably we will need to use that time.

The next meeting then will be on December 6th. If we understand that the House is likely to be in session, it will be in the morning at 9:00 a.m. The meeting in January, if you want to get it on your schedule, is on January 10th at 1:00 p.m. in this location. (Interruption)

I'm being asked if there is a particular order. I think my own sense, if this is acceptable to the committee, would be to allow the clerk to explore possibilities for when people can be here and to set the order of meetings based on availability. Is that an

acceptable arrangement as opposed to locking things into a specific date? I'm again seeing nods.

Thank you very much for working hard at this and for your co-operation and input, and have a good day.

The meeting is adjourned.

[The committee adjourned at 9:28 a.m.]