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COMMITTEE

ON

COMMUNITY SERVICES

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Legislative Committees Office

Community Child Welfare Boards

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COMMUNITY SERVICES COMMITTEE

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Hon. Denise Peterson-Rafuse
Hon. Gordie Gosse

In Attendance:

Ms. Kim Langille
Legislative Committee Clerk

WITNESSES

Community Child Welfare Boards

Ms. Delores Feltmate, Chairwoman
Cape Breton-Victoria Child Advocacy Society

Mr. Cyril Reid, Chair
Provincial Council of Chairs & Cumberland Child Advocacy Board



House of Assembly
Nova Scotia

HALIFAX, TUESDAY, OCTOBER 7, 2014

STANDING COMMITTEE ON COMMUNITY SERVICES

9:00 A.M.

CHAIRMAN
Ms. Patricia Arab

MADAM CHAIRMAN: If I could ask everybody to take their seats, I'd like to call the meeting to order.

I'd like to welcome everybody here today. My name is Patricia Arab. I'm the MLA for Fairview-Clayton Park, and I am the Chairman of the Community Services Committee.

Just a little bit of housekeeping before we get started. Those of you around the table might notice that we have microphones that are not familiar to us. They do not have the red indicator, so I really need to stress that during this meeting, for the sake of Hansard, even though it is difficult, you need to wait until I address you before you start speaking, in particular during the questioning portion. It's more natural to have a back-and-forth dialogue, but Hansard will not know who is speaking unless I introduce you. If we can try to work on that, I know they will be very appreciative.

Today we're going to be receiving a presentation from representatives of the Community Child Welfare Boards. We will ask witnesses to introduce themselves shortly, but I'd like to first go around and ask the committee members to introduce themselves.

[The committee members introduced themselves.]

MADAM CHAIRMAN: I'd like to remind everybody around the table and also in attendance to please make sure their cellphones are turned off or switched to vibrate. Again, we are recording these proceedings, so it just makes it a little less distracting.

I would now ask our presenters to introduce themselves.

[The witnesses introduced themselves.]

MADAM CHAIRMAN: We welcome you, and we're very happy to have you.

Without further ado, I will ask either Mr. Reid or Ms. Feltmate to begin their presentation. Mr. Reid.

MR. CYRIL REID: Good morning, and thank you on behalf of the Community Child Welfare Boards for the opportunity to appear before you today. It's a privilege and an honour, and hopefully we'll leave you a little better informed with our presentation. I will give an overview of the Community Child Welfare Boards - how we came about and where we hope to go - and then Delores will pitch in with more specific information about what we're working on now and hope to achieve.

I'm going to start with a quote. I think you all have copies of the presentation? Good. I don't like technology because of Murphy's Law: you know if anything's going to happen, it will happen.

I'm going to start with a quote from Margaret Wheatley, who's a well-known American author. She said, "There is no power for change greater than a community discovering what it cares about." I think we all know where she's coming from.

The objectives of my presentation are to outline the development of Community Child Welfare Boards in Nova Scotia, and to provide an overview of the purpose and value of Community Child Welfare Boards.

Slide 4 outlines what I'm about to do in terms of giving you background, and talk about the integration of the board, the role of community boards, the provincial scene, and the challenges and opportunities that we face. And of course, then Delores will follow with the second part, as I mentioned earlier.

First of all, a little of the background: Nova Scotia had a mixed system of service delivery for child welfare dating back to the 1940s, and prior to that, it was mainly private agencies and societies. But dating back to the 1940s, there were six district offices, 13 Children's Aid Societies, plus Mi'kmaq Family and Children's Services. The Children's Aid Societies developed in various counties, often with a volunteer in the beginning as an executive director, performing the duties of child protection. Other counties did not develop Children's Aid Societies, so government stepped in at the time and performed the role of child protection, and a couple examples of those areas were Digby and Antigonish.

Integration of the Children's Aid Societies into the Department of Community Services - there were two reviews that provided the impetus for this. Back in 2001, a report of the joint working group to the Honourable Peter Christie, Minister of Community

Services at the time, called this report. It was presented, and it noted that economies of scale and service effectiveness sometimes require a regional or cross-jurisdictional approach.

Then in June 2004, in Deloitte and Touche's Review of Child Welfare Services, Governance and Business Model - prepared again at the request of the same minister - three options were presented at that time: a single private agency, a single public authority, or a public sector line department. Number three was the option that was recommended and accepted by the government of the day.

The government accepted number three but on a voluntary basis. Minister Morse agreed that if Deloitte and Touche's report was implemented, a number of factors would have to be considered: there would be no job loss for staff, no reduction in service sites, current salaries would be retained, community boards would be maintained - by "community boards," we would go from Children and Family Services and Children's Aid Societies to Community Child Welfare Boards - and that Deloitte and Touche's recommendations would remain under review.

Moving on, DCS hired a full-time coordinator to support development of the Community Child Welfare Boards. Some of the outcomes of this, of course: a resource guide has since been developed and a website as well. Once an agency and DCS agreed on joining DCS, a formal memorandum of agreement was signed by the board and the minister, and a celebration event was held.

Just a little more information on that - the process really started in earnest in 2006 with Shelburne and Lunenburg going over to the province, so to speak, and I think Halifax did in the same year. It concluded in 2010 with Pictou-Colchester and Inverness-Richmond becoming part of the province and no longer a private agency, and that concluded that particular process. Out of that process, as I mentioned, community boards sprang as a result, because the agreement was, in most cases, that those boards had an option then of becoming child welfare boards.

The role of the community boards, as outlined and continues, is to serve as a link between the community and DCS - that is, partners supporting each other, because once the private agencies went by the wayside, there was no voice in the community for children and families because the province had total control, total say, total administration. To positively advocate legislation and influence policies affecting children and families, and CFSA, which Delores mentioned in her part - is one of our main goals there, or changes to it.

Do public education on issues in the area of child welfare - for example, prevention of child abuse, effective parenting, and SchoolsPlus. Work with partners to prevent, alleviate, and remedy the personal, social, and economic conditions that might place children and families at risk, and support DCS in their efforts to protect families, support and educate families, and ensure safe, permanent homes for children. In other words, as

mentioned earlier, we considered ourselves partners - not enemies fighting them tooth and nail, but working with them to achieve what is best for children and families.

To continue to Slide 12, to strengthen and build community and service networks, and join with other partners, including DCS, to create a community that places a high priority on safe, prosperous, educated, and healthy children and families.

On the provincial scene, a provincial coordinator was hired in 2008 to assist the boards in their formation and development and bylaws and that sort of thing. Boards were established and have been established in all four regions of the province. The Council of Chairs, which I represent here today, was formed in 2009. That is made up of all the Chairs of the 10 boards in the province. An annual budget for each board was assigned, a resource guide was developed, and a website was developed, as I mentioned earlier. A community advocacy award was given last year for the first time, to recognize community advocacy and to encourage it, and a new logo was developed as well.

Semi-annual meetings with the minister and/or deputy have taken place, and as part of the agreement will continue to take place. I should mention that this is the third different government we've worked with over the years, and nothing has changed so far in terms of that. Hopefully it will continue. Annual workshops for board members and DCS staff are to educate board members; we all come from different regions of the province, so to bring them up to a common level where we can share things. In fact, our next AGM and training board workshop is November 6th and 7th.

Consultations with provincial partners such as Nova Scotia Council for the Family - we've worked closely with them in the past. It's a little harder now since the government has cut funding to them, but they still exist and still operate. Consultations with national organizations such as the Child Welfare League of Canada - we try to partner with other organizations that are out there to better conditions for children and families.

Challenges and opportunities - I'm near the end. That is to create boards in every county of the province, especially those that did not have private agencies or Children's Aid Societies. We have 10 now, as I mentioned, 10 different counties and sometimes dual counties. Even Antigonish that didn't have a private agency now has a board. It's hard to see who's behind us but I know some of the Chairs from other parts of the province are here today as well. I saw Doreen Beaton come in and Bob Parker from Halifax as well - I don't have eyes in the back of my head, guys.

Another challenge is to motivate boards and keep them motivated. We're all volunteers, working out of our own communities. As you know, it's harder and harder to get volunteers for any organization including churches and everything. Their hearts are in the right place, but we have to keep them motivated in order to keep them, and that's always a challenge. That's why the annual workshop is so important.

Continue involvement with community provincial and national organizations, continue dialogue with the minister and deputy minister to ensure action, and I have to add there, I said we've worked with three different governments and have had great support from all three. But each time there's a change in government, of course, there's a change in minister and often deputy minister, and as a result, we have to start over with the education process again. As I say we are volunteers, so it's an ongoing process.

Continue dialogue with senior staff because often senior staff are the ones that are going to the minister and deputy and sending the message on our behalf. One of the big issues, and we're still working on it, is to become recognized in the Children and Family Services Act. The current minister has told us it's on her agenda and part of her mandate to change the Act because it is drastically outdated, and Delores will tell you why shortly I'm sure.

I was really pleased recently - I don't know if I dare bring up health in here - but I was I was very pleased recently when Minister Glavine mentioned changes to the Act and how important community health boards - not health boards but community health boards, which would be our parallel in community services - how important they are to the province and to his department, and I hope the Minister of Community Services feels the same way about us.

We publish an annual report, and again with volunteers it's an ongoing struggle. Sometimes it's every two years, biennial, but we do it. Of course, we have to continually think globally and act locally.

Before I conclude, I want to acknowledge the support and input of George Savoury of Savoury Consulting. He recently retired as Executive Director of Family and Children's Services and he helped with this presentation. We call him the "Father of Community Child Welfare Boards" because he was the one who was given the task of integrating the private agencies into government and establishing community boards around the province. Without his leadership I can tell you that we would not exist today as Community Child Welfare Boards. George is here today and I would like to acknowledge his presence. Thank you, and now Delores will take over unless you have a question but probably it is better to wait.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Thank you, Mr. Reid. Mr. Savoury, we would give you a round of applause but I've already warned them that they're not allowed to make any noise. (Laughter) Thank you for joining us.

Ms. Feltmate.

MS. DELORES FELTMATE: I'd like to echo what Cyril said and take this time to thank you for hearing what we have to say. I think it's really important that you heard who we are. What we're going to say is important but I want you to know where this is coming

from. I think that Cyril did a really good job of introducing us and that will help you put what comes next into some context.

We are a group that reflects the concerns of our communities. There are 11 of us - 11 different boards across the province, and we have come together on two particular issues that we have identified as particular concerns for the children here in Nova Scotia.

When Dwight Bishop retired last year - he was the Ombudsman here in Nova Scotia - he said that the division of the office that deals with children needed to be expanded, and that is something that we have been saying for the last number of years. It is also something the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child has been advocating for, it is also something that the Section 88 Committee, which is the Advisory Committee to the Minister of Community Services on the Children and Family Services Act, has been recommending. So he wasn't saying anything new but he did say that the division of the Office of the Ombudsman that deals with children needs to be expanded.

We know here in Nova Scotia that office did not compare to other offices across Canada, and although the office did wonderful work, and they truly did, on a shoestring budget, the lowest funded office across Canada, certainly there needs to be an expansion and it has to look different and it has to operate different in order to best serve the needs of children in our community.

Some of the recommendations for expansion of the office would include having it be a self-standing office. Right now the division of the Office of the Ombudsman that deals with children also deals with seniors. So when you have an office that deals with children and also deals with other adult issues, the issues of children tend to take second priority and that has been identified as a concern. I think it's worthwhile noting that there are only two offices in Canada that are not self-standing, Nova Scotia is one of them and Quebec would be another one.

The office would need to have a wide mandate. Currently here in Nova Scotia the division of the Office of the Ombudsman has a very, very narrow mandate for a few different reasons. Certainly resource-based, their ability to resource different areas would be part of it, but they primarily dealt with children who were in correctional facilities or in residential care and that would have taken the bulk of where their investment would be.

We know that in the community vulnerable children exist in many areas and we know that we need a wide mandate that cuts across not just the Department of Community Services, but across other departments as well if we want to truly serve the children in Nova Scotia the way that has been recommended. Not only recommended, I might add, that when we signed and ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child we said we would establish these offices and they would look a certain way and they would perform in a certain way. In Nova Scotia we certainly have somewhere to go with that, we haven't lived up to the international treaty that we have signed.

This office would also need to have strong powers but like an ombudsman's office it would have to be created through legislation, would have to have investigative powers, and it does right now, but it also has to have the ability to advise the public. An ombudsman's office often deals with issues and a children's commissioner's office - and I'm going to refer to it as a children's commissioner's office from here on in - would also deal with rights. It wouldn't be the last place you would go; it would be an office that would see patterns and gaps in the system and may be able to make recommendations, advise the public, and involve communities on that level. Certainly it would need to be resourced differently; \$400,000 is a miniscule amount of money compared to what other provinces - and how other provinces - fund their offices.

We all know - even us in the community - that we are a province that is dealing with tough economic realities, but the reality is this: if an office of this type did exist in Nova Scotia, then maybe we would have had the ability to have been involved in situations that in the long run have cost the taxpayers tens of millions of dollars. I'm thinking of the Nova Scotia Home for Colored Children; I'm thinking of the money that went into the commission for Rehtaeh Parsons - issues around that. If a portion of that money had funded an office maybe - and that's the pragmatic take on it - maybe those things would not have evolved to that situation. More importantly, maybe those children would not have gone through the things that those children have gone through.

So like I say, you know who we are and this is what we're saying. We are echoing the concerns of UNICEF; we're echoing the concerns right here in Nova Scotia of the minister's advisory committee, which made this recommendation many years ago. We believe that the children in Nova Scotia deserve the same opportunities and the same care as all children across Canada.

One of the things that also may have been affected or progressed quicker is the fact that our legislation for children at risk here in Nova Scotia, as Cyril had alluded to before, is definitely in need of updating. It reflects a time and a place that no longer exists and we know more now, and the legislation has not kept pace with what we know.

Currently, we know that in this province - again, outside of our agreement with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child - we define a child in the Nova Scotia Children and Family Services Act as a person under the age of 16, which doesn't sound like much until you realize that Child Welfare, unless a family is already involved, will not be able to provide services to a child if they're over the age of 16, but DCS doesn't usually get involved with individuals until they're 19 so we have that vulnerable gap there. If we'd had an office that had wide ability to influence public policy, maybe we would have been able to address that issue, as almost every province in Canada has, earlier.

Also, the definition of neglect is outdated and it does not reflect the current research in what we know brings harm to children. Again, if we had an office - and I gave you some notes and you can take a look at all the provinces that have already done that, we are

certainly in need of some updating. So basically, that's who we are, that's what we're saying, and we can open it up for questions.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Thank you so much, Ms. Feltmate. We'll start with questions. Mr. Orrell.

MR. EDDIE ORRELL: Thank you for your presentation. I know Delores had a conference last Saturday in Sydney on children at risk, and I attended that conference along with a colleague of mine from Sydney River-Mira-Louisbourg. We heard really passionate statements. We heard an interview from a child that had been in a situation that was just heart-wrenching to hear what that child went through.

You talked a little while ago about changing the Act. Have there ever been any bills introduced in our Legislature that you know of to have a separate child advocacy officer instead of mixed in with what is there now and having that as one of their duties?

MS. FELTMATE: Actually there has been. It was presented by the Liberal Government. Zach Churchill presented a Private Member's Bill that outlined a children's commissioner's office that would look like what we're talking about here. It was a Private Member's Bill, and I think it might have had one reading; I'm not sure, but certainly there was some understanding with Zach about the importance of this. He was passionate enough to create this bill and to introduce it, so hopefully we're talking to receptive ears here.

MR. ORRELL: Has there been any indication that that bill will be reintroduced and acted upon, in your mind or in your opinion, or had any consultation with either the minister now, Mr. Churchill, or the government themselves?

MR. REID: To my knowledge, it's still on the shelf, and I understand that it may be due to a money issue. This is not speaking directly with Mr. Churchill. He did introduce the bill, by the way, in May - the first reading was on May 4, 2012. I do have a copy of it; I don't know if it was circulated amongst members, but I do have a copy which I can leave with you to be circulated, if you don't. It was very comprehensive, and it was basically what we were looking for, to a large extent, except the names might be a little different - we're talking about "child commissioner" now - but it certainly was a main goal of the Liberal Government when they were in Opposition. I can't speak for them now.

MR. ORRELL: The May 2013 Auditor General's Report identified some gaps in the legislation, and obviously we know that. I asked a question in the Legislature last week about changing the age from 16 to 18. The minister says they are going to open up the legislation in 2016. That's still two years away. In your opinion, is there something that may stop that from being opened up earlier, or would we benefit from it being opened up earlier? Does it take that long in order to make sure that we get this right, so that we don't end up doing something that may harm the child more by doing a knee-jerk reaction? Is that date and time reasonable, or should it be done a little bit sooner than that?

MS. FELTMATE: Well, sooner is always better. I don't think we need any more commissions, any more studies, or any more consultation. We know this needs to be changed, and we know why it needs to be changed, so the sooner we deal with this, the better. In a province that is concerned about budget and money, I want you to think about what happens to a 16-, 17-, or 18-year-old child who does not have a way to access services. They don't disappear. They show up, but they show up in worse shape, with more problems. They show up in mental health, they show up in the criminal justice system, they show up in all different departments, and they cost us an incredible amount of money.

One of the statistics I was given was that for every high-risk 14-year-old child that we deter from brushes with the criminal justice system, which go hand in hand with a lack of services and need, we save the community \$3.4 million. So sooner is always better, and we certainly will be there to support and encourage the minister to do that. We are absolutely elated that she has made the commitment to move the legislation forward.

MR. ALLAN ROWE: Thank you both for your presentation this morning. I just want to actually spring from that and a couple of questions from Mr. Orrell earlier. Have you had discussions with the minister, with the department, so far? You mentioned that every time a new government comes in it's almost like starting all over again from ground zero. Have you had those discussions? How positive were they? Where do you see, if any, roadblocks or issues - if you could expand on that a little for me?

MR. REID: Yes, we have had a discussion. We had a meeting with the minister back probably six or eight months ago. As Delores has mentioned, she mentioned that the change to the Children and Family Services Act is certainly at the top of her mandate. It's a priority with her. We're hoping that will take place.

We explained Community Child Welfare Boards to her. I've written her a number of times via email, and have had no response back from her other than at our meeting. I want to add, though, to clarify some things, apparently the legislation is already in effect to address the issues of children, to fill that gap of children 16 to 19 years. As a former guidance counsellor, it certainly was a main issue with me in my other life, and I'm sure it's still a concern now.

We were told at the time by the department, by senior staff, that it is in the legislation, it just needs to be addressed in all the documents and policies - the Honourable Denise Peterson-Rafuse might address it, too, if she wants to. It was there and we were told senior staff was working on it.

When we last met with the current minister and senior staff, we were told that it hasn't happened yet - and this has been over a matter of a couple of years now - it hasn't happened yet because there has been a change in staff and they almost have to start over again. So we're not sure where it is right now in terms of that. I don't know if that answers your question, Mr. Rowe.

MS. FELTMATE: One of the things that has been repeatedly echoed through the Auditor General's Report of May 2000, and recently through the Ombudsman's report released just this July - although it just focused on one particular child - is that there is a lot of confusion about child service delivery in child welfare. There is a tremendous amount of confusion. What Mr. Reid was talking about was a part of the legislation that can be enacted in special circumstances to deal with children at that age gap. It almost unanimously has not been across the province, and there is a tremendous amount of confusion about that. If you've read the Auditor General's Report, communication and confusion about policy and standards - again echoed in the Ombudsman's report - is one of the biggest concerns about the delivery of child welfare services here in the province.

MR. ROWE: To follow, has there been any discussion at all in perhaps having established fixed meetings, a schedule of meetings going forward, so that you know it's a check-in every X number of months or so? Has that been discussed?

MR. REID: That would be ideal because I must say, the ministers are always busy, regardless of the department, and we generally go through senior staff to arrange meetings. It's often very difficult to get that meeting so that would really be ideal if that could be arranged - to have set times. It's in our agreements with the various boards and with the government of the day to meet twice a year. That would certainly solve a lot of issues and a lot of problems. Some years it's easier, and some ministers are easier than others, but you have certainly brought up a very good point.

MR. ROWE: Just one more, Madam Chairman. I'm actually going to switch gears just a little bit. Thanks very much for the answers and hopefully we can move some of those things forward.

I just want to go back to your slide deck, Mr. Reid. One of the things I noticed that kind of pricked my ears up a little was maintaining the motivation of volunteer boards - if you could maybe just expand on it ever so slightly. I'm sure we're all familiar with volunteer boards and how challenging it is to keep people involved in that. With many of these boards, is it just that simple issue of splitting times, splitting the amount of effort and time people are able to donate, or are there specific frustrations or challenges that make it difficult to keep people?

MR. REID: I think it's a combination of both actually. A lot of people who serve on these boards around the province are involved in other volunteer organizations, as well, so their time is an issue. The demands too - these boards demand a lot from members and a number of our members, including myself, are getting older and more tired, and sometimes it feels like we're fighting a windmill. You really have to be determined and really committed to serve there.

Specific issues - I'm sure there are, and I'm trying to think back to my own board and with our board. I know that some others around the province at the time, when it switched from Children's Aid Societies and ours, Family and Children's Services, it was a

quasi-administrative type of thing. We had the responsibility of running the board and staff. Right now, it's completely different with the Community Child Welfare Boards because it's more idea-based and policy-based and trying to influence policy, as opposed to running things. Some people couldn't make that shift in terms of a total different philosophical shift, as you can imagine.

Those who did find it very challenging and very exciting that we can speak on behalf of the children and families in our community. We work with other groups in the community, by the way. It's not just meeting as a board and then reporting to the province. It's connecting with other groups in the community so we can get feedback as to what's important, because what we as individuals may think is important may not be the issues of the day, as you all know. It's almost like a politician, you know. You really have to keep informed and keep on top of them, and as volunteers, it's constant.

I know last year, and in past years, in serving in the Council of Chairs as chairman - I've been retired now from my job as school counsellor for most of my life, I've been retired 10 years - I've been, I think, putting more time in volunteer issues. Just out of curiosity, I sat down one day and checked the hours I put in last year - someone mentioned my travel expenses coming to meetings - and I think I was serving on six or seven different boards and commissions, a lot of it associated with this job, and the hours I put in with travel, preparation, and attending meetings was something like 685 hours, I think. This is all volunteer, by the way. Not one cent honorarium - not that I'm looking for it.

So it takes a big commitment on the part of people and fortunately the boards that exist now, we have that; the boards that are fledgling, and there are a couple of areas - and I won't name them - where they're having trouble getting up and running because of the fact that they can't get the volunteers.

I'm sorry I was so wordy on that. I don't know if I answered or not.

MR. ROWE: No, not at all. Thanks very much for the answer, and I'm sure I speak for everyone how much we appreciate the work of yourself and everyone who volunteers on this board.

MR. REID: Thank you.

MR. ROWE: And thanks for your answers.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Ms. Peterson-Rafuse.

HON. DENISE PETERSON-RAFUSE: Thank you, Madam Chairman. I've had the distinct pleasure to work with the board members and with Mr. Savoury and I will say they are incredible Nova Scotians and the dedication that they give to our children in the province - and I can understand the frustration of the political system for boards of this nature, because when a new government comes in and new information flows and

education needs to be presented, I'm very pleased that our current minister has committed to opening up the legislation. We worked together moving forward on that.

So my question today is, perhaps we could get a status update from the department, because when I initially became minister, that was one of the first priorities, and there was a lot of foundational work that needs to be done to open a piece of legislation of that nature. So there was a great deal of work that I would be kind of surprised if you'd have to start over, even if you had new staff in those positions, just because of the fact that it would be all documented.

We were getting pretty close to moving on that before last year's election, and one of the key components of that was to have a restorative approach, where we brought in - before the legislation was open - discussions, because with any legislation, there are naysayers and then there are the supporters. When you open the legislation to change one piece, you're opening it up for all pieces of that legislation, so we wanted to make sure that the first time we did it, we did it right and that those that may have had some issues about it had an opportunity in a restorative manner, and working with the child welfare boards to be able to understand what their perspective was, and how, that if there were issues from those that were opposing it, that we would be able to work something in the legislation that satisfied everyone.

So we were basically at that point. So that's what I'm asking today, is, at the committee level, if we could get a report on why we wouldn't be ready to take that next and final step before the legislation would be open. I would think we could be ready to try to do that before 2016, and perhaps we could get a report back, Madam Chairman. Do I need to make a motion?

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Maybe it's a motion. There's a motion on the floor to ask the department for a status update on the current legislation and to see where they're at and what any hold-ups might be.

MS. PETERSON-RAFUSE: Yes. I guess to clarify my question; we were at that point to make that next leap that would have been the process of bringing people around the table and having that discussion.

Do I need to make a motion to ask for that? I'll make a motion to see if we can - the board would receive information with timelines, if possible, on where we sit today and where we're going in the next number of years.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: So there's a motion to ask for a status update with a timeline on this particular piece of legislation. It was moved by Ms. Peterson-Rafuse and seconded by Mr. Orrell.

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

The motion is carried. We will follow that up with the department.

MS. PETERSON-RAFUSE: I have a couple of other questions. Thank you very much to the committee for that, I think that's really important for the welfare boards to have that knowledge.

The question I have is with respect to the proposal to broaden the scope of the Ombudsman's Office in order to have a self-standing office for children. I'm wondering what discussions have taken place within the department and have you had those discussions with the minister? Does there seem to be some support to move in that direction?

MS. FELTMATE: We've had ongoing discussions with different ministers over the years. Originally we were told by senior civil servants that there really was no need for the creation of a separate body, a self-standing separate body with wide powers, a wide mandate, and updated resources because it was being looked at by the division of the Ombudsman's Office. We sort of went, oh, okay. We had read the report done by the Minister's Advisory Committee on the Children and Family Services Act and they had recommended it - they have been recommending it for many years. Then when we looked into it, we realized that, actually, what we have here does not resemble in any way, shape, or form what exists in other provinces, nor does it resemble in any way, shape, or form what we have already agreed to when we signed the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

MS. PETERSON-RAFUSE: Have there been current discussions with our present minister so she has an understanding of that need?

MS. FELTMATE: We have mentioned it to the minister and we're going to continue to keep the conversation alive. As part of our mandate as child welfare boards, we get to sit down with the Minister of Community Services twice a year and each time we sit down, we present to her what we're asking for, which is this office and changes to the legislation.

MR. REID: Delores has answered it quite well. I don't want to rebut her or anything. I just want to thank the committee for passing that motion to get information. As I mentioned earlier, we have worked with three levels of government over our short term. We have been in existence since 2009 as the Council of Chairs and we've had great relationships with all ministers and deputies, especially the previous one. I have to make that comment here, I know it's a non-partisan group, but she was very supportive of the community boards and we grew stronger as a result of it.

I probably made the mistake of saying that in our one and only meeting with the current minister, that we had great support. But anyway, I did say it because I'm a straight-shooter and I tell it as I see it and we're hoping for the same support from this one.

But it does concern me a little bit. Until the Act changes and we're recognized in the Act, we really have no official status with the province. The minister can wipe us out - well, she can't. She can try, but we'd still operate it on our own; we want to make that clear. But we get minimal funding from the province to operate as boards.

I'm involved with another organization, the Nova Scotia Council for the Family, and their major supporter was the provincial government, DCS. Out of the blue last March they got a notice giving them three months' notice that their funding from the province was going to be cut - and you've been involved with the cuts to the Family - and still no explanation. I know we're not here to talk about the Council for the Family, but we work with them and we cannot get an explanation why that was done. And now they're struggling, they're fledgling, and they've been in operation since 1967, nearly 50 years working with children and supporting former kids in care and things like that, and we can't get an answer as to why the funding was cut. We know times are hard but at least say that to us, you know what I mean?

In terms of the Ombudsman's Office, you raised the last issue, it has been an ongoing issue and we've had discussions with the previous minister and we did raise it with the current one that it is important, it's on the top of our list as things that are long overdue and as in your last position in private life, I'm sure you can appreciate that as much as I did at the time. In fact, in September Marv Bernstein, the former child advocate for Saskatchewan, and currently the chief policy adviser for UNICEF, was in town and a group of us, Delores and I and a couple of others, met with him and we invited Dwight Bishop, the former ombudsman for the province.

We had a frank discussion over several hours and they recommended that Nova Scotia is way behind in terms of establishing and protecting rights of children in this province - that's why we're pushing so hard now and that's why we were so pleased to get in front of you today to make that point.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: I wanted to say I don't think it was a mistake to tell the current minister that you had a great relationship with the previous minister, I think that our minister is quite pragmatic and there have been a number of things that she has kept and wanted to build on from the previous government.

MR. REID: Yes, I realize that.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: I don't want to give the previous minister a bigger head, as Mr. Orrell alluded to. (Laughter) But there are many things and the purpose of this committee is really just to support and to listen to see what we can do to make your experiences and jobs easier, so I appreciate those comments.

MS. PETERSON-RAFUSE: Can I just finish off?

MADAM CHAIRMAN: We'll let Ms. Peterson-Rafuse have . . .

MS. PETERSON-RAFUSE: Thank you, I really appreciate that, but the importance is, with respect to the children, and the work that you have done I do know that in the political setting there are times that it feels like you are on that rollercoaster ride continually going around, so it is all our jobs to ensure and work together in a restorative approach to make those changes, because we all have the same desire for the outcome and it is the protection of our children and those who are most vulnerable. I believe that the minister, the present minister, understands that and that's why she has publicly said that she will be looking at opening the legislation.

So perhaps we can get it moved along a little bit quicker and if this committee can urge the minister and give her support to do that, I hope that they will and I think that they will. I want to thank you very much for the work that we did together and I know that it will continue with the next minister.

MR. REID: I must admit up to this stage, for the same reason you gave, I didn't want to give the minister a swelled head, I've never mentioned it before her before but I did have to raise it today, in front of her unfortunately.

MS. PETERSON-RAFUSE: Thank you.

MR. REID: We do have confidence in the current minister, it's just that, as I say, we need clarification on where she stands on things and what she is doing, and Mr. Rowe, I think, made an excellent point of having regulatory scheduled meetings so that we can have that discussion.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Mr. Maguire.

MR. BRENDAN MAGUIRE: Thanks for coming out today. So you said there are four boards, or how many boards are there? Sorry.

MR. REID: There are 10 with - oh, sorry.

MR. MAGUIRE: There are four regions.

MR. REID: Four regions.

MR. MAGUIRE: Four regions, 10 boards.

MR. REID: Four regions with 10 boards currently in operation and one kind of in the works.

MR. MAGUIRE: So are these boards working together sharing information and best practices?

MR. REID: Yes.

MR. MAGUIRE: So what have you learned by sharing the information and what has come out of that?

MR. REID: Oh, you're putting me on the spot, aren't you? I'll just give you a couple of examples, probably the easiest way to do it.

When we meet as chairmen, and as I say the individual boards meet with community groups on their own, and Delores just had a big session which unfortunately I had a cold and couldn't get to - I'm still suffering the remnants of it - but we meet with our own community boards to discuss what we can do there, and we do things in our own community boards. Some of us have foundations where we give money; for example, we just gave \$2,500 in Cumberland that goes to kids, and give out bursaries and that. We take the issues which we consider that aren't local, that are more provincial, and bring them to our discussion with the minister and try to influence policy.

I'll give you two examples of those. One was, we have a board member who works with community health, and she brought an issue to the Cumberland board about children with problems registering for school, because you have to have a birth certificate to register for school. Lo and behold, some school boards at the time would not register the kids for school until they had a birth certificate. Their parents couldn't get birth certificates due to lack of funding or priorities, whatever. There were times when school would open in September when these young children could not enter school because they hadn't registered, so we brought that before the minister of the day and continued on it.

She referred it to a team - because it doesn't just affect DCS; it affects everyone - but apparently it got deferred to the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development. They are currently close to having a process of making sure that all children have a birth certificate, so it's ongoing, but it's close to resolution.

The other thing I wanted to mention is an issue that came locally and then brought provincially and was dealt with - the issue of dental coverage. As you know, up until a year or two ago, children up to the age of 10 were covered, but beyond that, they weren't. As a result of that, there were kids in school with major dental issues, and they came to us locally because we did have a bit of money in our foundation. A lot of parents weren't aware that the dental coverage expired once their children turned 10.

So we brought that up at the provincial level, and I don't know if it was because of our - the honourable former minister here can mention that if she wishes, but we did discuss it and brought it up on numerous occasions with them, and the ages did get changed, as you know. It's up to - is it 15 now? I don't know what it is right now, but it did

get changed and resolved a lot of that problem. I think that, by example, probably answers part of your question.

MR. MAGUIRE: Thank you. So is this a model that we see throughout other provinces in Canada?

MR. REID: Not to my knowledge. I think we're setting the groundwork for this as an example. We've had inquiries. In fact, I was asked to a presentation in Newfoundland and Labrador a year or so ago explaining what we're all about. So it is a good example. Some provinces - Ontario, I think - still have their own private Family and Children's Services and Aid Societies, and they're looking at - there's always that discussion of which is better, as you know. I think we are the only province in the country with Community Child Welfare Boards, and that's why I would like to protect it.

MR. MAGUIRE: So how is your mandate defined, as a board? Is there one mandate for the entire organization, or does each individual board have a mandate depending on their region?

MR. REID: We do have a mandate. I won't get into it now - I can if you wish - but we have a resource book which guides all the boards in the province. We can get that distributed - we can make sure that you have them, probably, that you get them. It does give the mandate and talks about bylaws. We all have to be registered with Joint Stocks and that, and then we have our own, because each board is unique in itself, and then we have our own statements explaining our roles and our missions and visions and that. I think I have enough copies here, so I'll circulate this at least, so that you know rather than taking the time to . . .

MADAM CHAIRMAN: I'm not sure about the pamphlet, Mr. Reid, but the package, the mandate, was already circulated. It should be the members . . .

MR. REID: Well, I'll circulate this just so you can see. In fact, I'll give you this now, but I do have enough for everyone. I didn't want to burden you. I know you get so much information, but this will give you the flavour of a local board. That's just an example of my board, not necessarily the others in the province.

MR. MAGUIRE: To go back to the legislation, personally - and I guess from a board standpoint - what changes in the legislation, ideally, if you could wave a magic wand, what would you like to see?

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Ms. Feltmate.

MR. MAGUIRE: Her hand jumped right up. (Laughter) She gets it.

MS. FELTMATE: In the words of the Auditor General who issued a report in May 2013, there are two specific changes in the legislation that we would like to see addressed. The first I've made reference to already. We have to redefine the "age of child" in the Act so that we can provide for that gap in services that now exists.

The second thing is we have to change our definition of "neglect" in the Act. As you probably know, Child Welfare Services is governed by the piece of legislation known as the Children and Family Services Act. Within that Act there is Section 22, which outlines ways in which services can be delivered to families once they are identified as struggling or children are in need of protection.

We have a threshold system. You have to meet the threshold to come to the attention of Child Welfare Services. You have to pass the threshold to receive services. Currently, the way that we define "neglect" in the Act, it only references physical neglect, so if a child is not fed or a child is not clothed, then the Crown can get involved to provide services.

I want to be very clear about something. We want to change the definition of "neglect" not to bring punitive measures to people who now find themselves dealing with Child Welfare Services. But we want to change the definition to include emotional harm and those kinds of things so that we can lower the threshold, so services can be delivered to families in a timely way so it doesn't escalate, so it doesn't end up where children are being apprehended and those kinds of things.

We have been asking for those two things for several years, and the Auditor General, in his great wisdom also, when he did the review of Child Welfare, said that needed to be done. He also said he didn't think that things were being put in place to have it be done, so this is certainly something that we would like to see.

MR. MAGUIRE: I could talk about this all day, but I promise I won't keep everyone.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: This is your last question. (Laughter)

MR. MAGUIRE: This is my last question. The definition of "age of youth," you're looking at 16 to 18?

MS. FELTMATE: Currently in the Act it outlines how to define terms, and when we're going to refer to "child" later on in the Act, we're going to refer to a person under the age of 16. That means that Child Welfare Services can only deal with people who are under the age of 16.

If the family has already been involved, they will continue providing services past that age. That's a problem because if a child - and I've had these instances, I come from the school system, too, and I was a guidance counsellor, and my work in the community - if a

child is 16, 17, or 18, and there is abuse, neglect, or those kinds of things, there is no agency to turn to. Child Welfare can't deal with you because you don't qualify and DCS wants you to be 19. Those are the kids who end up in all kinds of other departments with problems that have now escalated, and pragmatically that costs us tremendous amounts of money, but ethically, as a community we have to take care of our vulnerable citizens.

MR. MAGUIRE: My question is - for those of us who have been involved in DCS, I don't know if people are aware but you can stay on DCS until you're 21, so why not cover until you're off the system?

MS. FELTMATE: Exactly. Good point.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Ms. Treen.

MS. JOYCE TREEN: Thank you for your presentation. I have two different questions and since Brendan had 10 I guess, I can have two. (Laughter)

First of all, I'm just looking for a little clarification about your board. I understand the advocacy that you do, but where do your issues come from? You mentioned they came from board members and stuff. Where else can issues - can someone just in the community come right to you and say this is an issue, have you ever looked into this? I'm not sure how that part works.

MR. REID: I'll attempt to answer that. Yes, they can. We have regular meetings, plus we have an AGM which is open to the public - all meetings are open to the public if they want. Of course we would screen and check out whatever information came forward, to make sure it was legit. We're not there for axe-grinding, so to speak, we are there for legitimate issues. We have a group called Cumberland Kids, which we have a representative serve on. That's made up of representatives from SchoolsPlus, from the schools themselves, from the community, from mental health, from Health and Wellness, and from Justice. They have a lot of issues which they raise amongst themselves and a lot of the things they want to accomplish.

Then our representative on that committee would come back and bring back a report from there. Then we would either take up the cause or pass on it, depending on what it was. If it's positive and would improve the lives of children and youth in our community, then we pick it up and run with it.

MS. TREEN: The other is just a comment you said or one of the things you'd like changed in the Act about the age of a child. My husband just came home probably two weeks ago from work, and one of the ladies who works with him, her daughter showed up with a student who she went to school with. He is 18 and his mother decided that you are 18 now, I don't have to look after you, and she moved to Ontario. He appeared home with her and if it wasn't for her generosity - he is still living there. He has nowhere to go, nowhere to

get money, nothing. He was just left by his mother and off she went, she was done doing her duty. Luckily this child landed in a loving nest and is going to help him succeed.

Yes, I totally agree with that and I will be advocating for that.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: I'd like to add my own comment too. Ms. Feltmate, you mentioned that the kids who fall between the cracks at that age end up somewhere else in the system. I'd like to say on record that those are the lucky ones because I actually, in my former career, had a student who fell through the cracks and ended up dying because of it. I think you have a lot of supporters when it comes to firming up that gap.

MR. REID: I concur with you and, as guidance counsellors, you, Delores, and I have first-hand knowledge in dealing with kids like that. There are many who fall through the cracks that you don't hear about and it breaks your heart when you know them personally. On a broader scale, it's important to have supports there for them so that doesn't happen, but it does happen.

MS. FELTMATE: I think that sort of highlights the importance of a children's commissioner's office. I don't think there's a coincidence that our legislation is so outdated, I don't think there's a coincidence that we've had some of the issues that we do and we really don't have that independent office to look at patterns, to look at policy, to influence public policy.

The division of the Ombudsman's Office worked tirelessly, they were diligent but they are the last resource that you go to. A children's commissioner's office would be a proactive office that would look at all the issues and be able to make recommendations and hopefully we won't go to some of the places that we have come to.

MR. REID: Just to add to that, a commissioner of child and youth, as Delores said, I just want to add that not only would they investigate it as the Ombudsman's Office does, but would advocate as well and would be proactive and not wait for problems to arise before they deal with them.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Mr. Orrell.

MR. ORRELL: I'm glad to hear that everybody around the table is in agreement that that age needs to be changed, the sooner the better. I'm hoping we can all push the Department of Community Services to try to do that sooner. I'm glad to hear that Ms. Treen is going to keep pushing with the minister and make sure that happens and I encourage all of us to do the same.

I guess one question I do have is around domestic violence. We all know that there is serious impact with domestic violence on children. If you attended the Children at Risk Conference that Ms. Feltmate put on in Sydney, you would have heard about a 15- to 20-minute clip of a young girl who, in my opinion, it took a lot of courage to do the

interview. She interviewed with Ms. Feltmate. It was uncut - what she went through at the hands of supposedly a parent and a step-parent and people who were supposed to protect her, it was amazing and it would do your heart good to hear that and to see that this child - anyway, in saying that, the definition of "neglect." Yes, that child lived with a parent and a step-parent and supposedly was receiving the care she received, but by listening to her, we know she was neglected. Can you really, again, hammer on the need for the change on that definition and why it's so important to you guys?

MS. FELTMATE: That's a really good point. Our current definition essentially excludes a group of individuals who need services from obtaining the services at a time and place in their lives that could have the most impact. When we leave neglect as just physical neglect then what we have done is we've raised the threshold to be able to provide for families and children, and I'll give you an example of what could happen.

There was a baby born to a drug-addicted mom, and drugs were running the show in that household. The baby was being left - the neighbour saw the baby being left and called to have this looked at. She was concerned for the well-being of the child. When they came to look at the child, the child was clothed, the child was fed, and there really was no reason under the Act that they could substantiate for involvement at that level.

Of course what happens then, the behaviour - you know, if you're struggling and you're drowning and nobody throws you a rope, you go down farther and the situation escalates and there is more harm to the family, there's more harm to the child, there are more repercussions for the community. So sooner is better than later, and like I said it's very, very important that we be clear that we don't want to redefine "neglect" to create punitive measures for families that are struggling. We want to protect children and we want to provide services, because we know sooner is better than later.

MR. ORRELL: We talked about the child advocacy office being part of Community Services, and I think you threw out a number that there's something like \$400,000 being spent on that now. In your opinion, or would you have any numbers - and maybe you don't - that to change that to form a separate office, how much would that cost initially, and I guess my biggest question is, the savings that would come from that, would they far outreach the costs of the office or would they be just another amount of money spent? You said something like one neglected child was \$3.4 million or so. Could you elaborate on that for me and just give me what the estimated costs would be for that department?

MS. FELTMATE: We are the most underfunded office in Canada, at the present time, and comparable offices are funded in the neighbourhood of a million, a million and a half. I think it's important to understand that sometimes resources can be overstated. Look, more is always better, I think, and we'll take whatever you will give us, but it's not just the introduction of more resources, which of course we need, it's also the change in the mandate. It's also creating the political culture for this. It's also the work that the office would do that would have an impact that needs to be addressed. So certainly it needs to be

resourced in order to do that, and resources are important and money - I've just learned money is always the most important thing but I think that we have to understand, too, that it is the mandate and the change of the mandate and the way that the office is set up in a proactive way that really are crucial in creating the kind of commissioners office that we are looking for.

MR. REID: Just to respond, Delores certainly answered the question but we can try to get that information for you and for the committee, if you would like, but I do want to reiterate that an ombudsman's office wouldn't just be the responsibility of Community Services. It would be an independent office that would answer to the Legislature and the funding wouldn't come out of the DCS budget, it would be a separately funded entity, so as to avoid any confusion.

The other point I wanted to make - and I didn't totally answer Ms. Treen's question - besides community groups and individuals, the local Community Services Child Welfare officer attends our meeting as well. We always invite her and she usually attends, so we have that feedback within the department, as well, at the local level. I didn't want to make it appear as if it's us and them or we and them - they are an integral part of the information we gather and disseminate.

MR. ORRELL: Just to more or less wrap up my comments for today - we know domestic violence has a huge impact on the child, and we hope we can eradicate that which would eventually lead to some of the eradication of neglect and problems with children because of what they see and do.

I just want to thank Delores particularly - Mr. Reid, I can't say for yourself because I don't know you and what you do, but I know Delores works tirelessly in Cape Breton for the children in Cape Breton. I know that without people like her there would be a lot less advocacy for the children in our area, and I just want to thank her and I thank all your departments for what you do and continue that work because that is our most valuable resource right now. If we don't protect them, who is going to? We're fortunate that we have had loving families and we're loving families who have children, but there are people out there who aren't. I know Delores takes it on as if it's her own children and she does a tireless amount of work and I just want to thank her for that and thank your group for that.

MR. REID: Thank you for your comments. I concur with you - Delores is one of our hardest workers and that's why we made sure she was involved with the Community Child Welfare Board. She was involved in other groups originally and we said we want you with us leading the pack, especially in Cape Breton, but also in the province as well.

All of our chairmen are committed, but Delores certainly leads the pack and we're twisting her arm - I think she will be our incoming vice-chairman at the provincial level come next month.

MS. FELTMATE: Thank you.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Mr. Harrison.

MR. LARRY HARRISON: I appreciate all your comments and certainly all your work. I know legislation is put in place to try to protect everyone in society, and society is going through some very difficult stuff right now.

I remember back to when I was growing up, we never heard about the kinds of family problems and child problems that we are being faced with now. All these new legislation items coming in are really good. I guess my difficulty is that with the legislation and with the rules that are put in place, there doesn't seem to be much room left for individual circumstances when they change. People do change, and I don't see much room now.

In my former life I've had to deal with families who have evolved over the years and would turn out to be good parents and so on, but with legislation now - and a lot of the workers dealing with children and families, there doesn't seem to be much room for individual circumstances changing and trying to work with that.

I guess I'm frustrated by that. Is there anything in place now - other than individual people, perhaps like yourself, who realize that those changes can take place and individual circumstances do need to be looked at? Is there anything in place where people can actually go to be heard apart from - these are the regulations; this is what has to take place; you have to live with it? Is there a place that they can go and say, look, my circumstances have changed, this is what we're like today; can you help us?

MS. FELTMATE: I think that there is a lot of room for discretion on the part of the front-line workers when working with families. Their mandate is obviously to protect children, but their mandate is also to strengthen and support the family because we know strong families that are well-supported are able to best look after their children.

In my experience working with the front-line workers, their first line when working with a family is not in a punitive way. It is to try to support that family and to provide services to that family, obviously, at the same time, having to protect the child and make decisions about protecting the child.

It has been my experience, working with front-line social workers, that there certainly are standards and policies. There's certainly confusion around the standards and policies, but they really do prioritize working with the family and trying to support the family. It is really only out of necessity that they jump in and it becomes a legal, court-driven sort of system. When that happens, there have to be very, very serious, specific reasons to drive the process in that direction. That has been my experience with front-line social workers.

We have had the Ombudsman's Report that discusses the problems with Child Welfare. We've got the Auditor General's Report that echoes all the confusion and concerns with Child Welfare. But those front-line workers, and what they deal with on a day-to-day basis in a bureaucratically driven system, they have very, very tough jobs, and they show up and deal with very tough circumstances. Certainly, the systemic changes that we're looking for in the system are not a reflection, in my opinion, of these workers who are in the system. I don't think I've met one that I haven't had a tremendous amount of respect for.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: If I could just reiterate that. It has been my experience, the exact same, with front-line workers. With child protection, it's very much the last-case scenario to remove a child from their home. It's more about trying to give supports to those families. But we kind of have a culture where there's a fear that, oh, the kid's going to be ripped out of the house, and that's not the case, again, in my experience as well. I wanted to reiterate too, that there isn't anyone I've met on the front line that isn't extremely capable and dedicated to what they're doing. I think Mr. Reid wanted to follow up.

MR. REID: I was going to say a similar thing, actually. The only other thing I was going to add - because I think Mr. Harrison's question was probably a little broader in terms of community supports - is there are organizations there. But there are families and individuals, and youth - and you and I have seen it and Delores has seen it - that there are times when they're going through rough periods and they need to get into the system, but they're just as likely to get out just as quickly. And those supports need to be there, especially the 16- to 19-year-olds that we were talking about earlier, and kids in care, and former kids in care. We need that - we need a complete system.

But it shouldn't be all on the government. The communities have to be involved, as I mentioned earlier. It takes a community to raise a child. I know the churches have been active. We have the food banks. We have other organizations, SchoolsPlus working with children, so there are organizations and groups there that work. But for some reason, and partly because of the legislation, there are kids who fall through the cracks. Even with legislation, we need - and I think this is why we're pushing so hard for a commissioner for children and youth - we need somebody to advocate, and not just tell children where they can go to get help, but take them there, lead them there, and advocate for them, and say, listen, we have to deal with this child before he or she commits suicide, or whatever the case may be. And we've all seen that. Sorry, Mr. Harrison.

MR. HARRISON: Thank you. I certainly want to say that you're absolutely right; the front-line workers do a tremendous job. I am dealing with a situation now where the front-line worker is in agreement that someone has changed in the last number of years and would advocate for a change in environment for two children to go to another family. But the rules say - there was something in place concerning one of the individuals involved, a record - and the rules say that you have to wait seven years before you're eligible to adopt, or whatever the case may be.

I know this individual. I know this family very well. They are ready to now take on that responsibility. The seven years is not up for another seven months, but in the meantime we have two small children who need a good home and that individual, I know with all my heart, will provide that good home now - but because the legislation says wait seven years, there's a seven-month period now where those two children are not going to get the care that they should. I guess it's just that kind of a situation that I am talking about.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Maybe Ms. Feltmate, if either one of you could explain - I'm not familiar with why that legislation would be there - if either of you are familiar with why that would be. No? All right, so we'll put that away for the question to ask after the committee wraps up.

MS. FELTMATE: I am a foster parent and I know they do background checks on you and there is a criminal records check and there is a child abuse registry check. I'm not sure what that piece of legislation is that you have to wait seven years, but maybe it has something to do with that. I'm not sure.

I know there is a real focus in the province now more than ever in trying to accommodate children and get them into homes and permanency and to keep children in the same place and to connect them with loving, stable relationships. There has been a focus on - there has been concern that children have been left to linger in the system and adrift in the child welfare system, so there is a move to get children into permanent adoptive homes as opposed to staying in foster care.

I am a foster parent and foster parents are wonderful people, but foster parents cannot replace the permanency for children that they can obtain by either addressing the home issues, solidifying that family, or by adoption. I know that even at the provincial level that connecting children to permanent situations and getting there as quickly as possible is certainly on their radar.

MS. PETERSON-RAFUSE: To follow up on this discussion - part of the issue is the flexibility that you can put in legislation. That's a challenge and that's the reason why there needs to be a discussion with all parties before you go forward - and I'm not talking about political Parties, but everybody who has a stake in this. I mean, we consult and consult and that wheel keeps on turning and you never get to the point that you need to - what I'm talking about is bringing representation from a variety of points of view together and people who have expertise in these types of things. When you look at the fact that you want to change the legislation and the meaning of "neglect," it makes sense to all of us that that would be changed.

Now those who are in typically the legal profession have another point of view. I'm not trying to slight anybody, but the point of view is parental rights. That's where you get the other side that you don't even think of because it's like a no-brainer - why would you not put in emotional neglect? That's the area where it's so key to bring those people to the

table because that's what they are fighting for, that parental right and making sure that parents do not lose any rights within that legislation.

Then you have Community Services in the middle, not knowing which way to go. When they work separately that's why the wheels keep on spinning and that's why it's so critical. As I mentioned earlier, we were at that point, to jump off that Ferris wheel, and have a group that would be working together that had a different perspective and see if we could work out legislation that would result in support from all sides or it's not going to work, it's going to keep on going and going.

I guess that would be my recommendation to Community Services - the next step, all the information is there to bring the legal component, the legal representation. There's a lawyer at Dalhousie University who actually wrote the legislation that should be brought to the table, along with the Child Welfare Board, so those real, honest discussions can take place and then you have legislation that everybody is supporting as it goes forward in the House.

MR. REID: Yes, I concur with Ms. Peterson-Rafuse that all Parties need to be brought to the table. I would go a step further and say they should be brought to the table at the same time.

MS. PETERSON-RAFUSE: That's what I'm recommending - everyone together in that sort of approach, because if you're not at the table at the same time, a lot gets missed in the communication or understanding. I have learned that many times people are on the same page, but they're speaking a different language so they think they're on a different page. So that's my recommendation: all at the same time.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Thank you, Ms. Peterson-Rafuse. Are there any further questions for our witnesses?

I really want to give you a big thanks for coming and presenting to us today. It has been very informative and you've given us some homework, which I love, but hopefully we'll have some follow-up for you quickly. We'll ask Ms. Langille to get any information that we find out for you back to you, and any further information that you would like to give to us, please don't hesitate. Would you like to say any wrap-up, Mr. Reid?

MR. REID: I do want to thank the committee. I can tell from the questions that your hearts are in the right places. As volunteers in the community, we need friends in high places, and you're the people we need to bring our voice to the government level. We can talk to individual MLAs and ministers and even the Premier - I've had discussions with him - but as Ms. Peterson-Rafuse was saying about changing the Act, we need all parties in on the discussion at the same time, not individually. When I walked in here and saw some friendly faces, I knew it was going to be a good meeting, and after talking to some of you individually and finding out there are some here from my native province of Newfoundland and Labrador, I knew it was going to be even better.

So thank you again for listening to us, and anything you need, any information, please get in touch with us. We're volunteers, but we have ways of getting information.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: I would just like to say again, as three people who did this for a living, it's very much a calling, but no more so than when deciding to dedicate your own personal time and your volunteer hours to be a champion for it. So thank you again very much for everything you do for the kids in this province.

MR. REID: And I should add, Madam Chairman, that I hate to break the news to you, but as a guidance counsellor securing for kids, you'll always be a counsellor at heart, and so you're stuck with it. Here I am, retired 10 years and still at it.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: I'm okay with that. I'm all right with that.

We'll just take a short recess. I ask the committee members not to leave. We do have some business to take care of prior to adjourning for the day. Thank you again to our two witnesses and to everybody who came to support them.

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

[10:36 a.m. The committee reconvened.]

MADAM CHAIRMAN: I'd like to call the meeting back to order, please. Our committee has received correspondence that the clerk has printed out for each of you; you should have it in your packages. If you haven't already, could you just take a minute to read through this email?

This was also forwarded by the clerk to each of you, prior to the meeting. It's my belief that in this particular instance, this isn't really something that our committee has a lot of control over. I would suggest that we do forward it on to the desk of the minister, for her information. Is there anyone else? Mr. Orrell.

MR. ORRELL: I'm just wondering if we could send it off to Maintenance Enforcement, as well, to see if we can make some kind of recommendation that in certain circumstances that the time frame be either sped up or eliminated. I don't know how we would word that or what we think about that but by the sounds of what is going on there - I think it was a three-month period, and that would be an eternity for some people in that situation with the waiting time.

I can understand that living in that situation and having to wait that long would be just an enormous mountain to climb. If we could forward that on to Maintenance Enforcement or the Justice Department to see if we can maybe amend that somehow so that we can prevent situations like that from happening. That would be my recommendation as well.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Possibly we could forward this to all three - Community Services, Justice, and Maintenance Enforcement - and strongly suggest that they take a look at this and follow up with us, see if there's some kind of solution that any of these departments can recommend.

MR. ORRELL: Thank you, Madam Chairman.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: We'll ask the clerk to do that for us on behalf of the committee and we'll report back to the committee once we've heard from all three, or any.

We have our annual report that will be tabled in the House, hopefully by next week. The clerk has passed that around electronically. Were there any changes or questions in regard to our report?

I would like to say that as the chair of this committee, I'm very pleased - I don't want to sound condescending - but surprisingly impressed by how dedicated all the members of this committee have been for the past year. I think it has been an amazing working relationship and I, as the chair, appreciate it, but more importantly, as a new MLA I really appreciate it and seeing that we come together and we kind of push politics aside and put the best interests of our witnesses and the issues that they present forward. That has been very impressive to me and I hope that for as long as we meet we can continue that attitude. When I read the report I was like - we're getting stuff done; this is government working effectively.

So if there are no changes or additions, if I could just get a motion to accept the annual report as sent out - Mr. Maguire, and seconded by Mr. Rowe.

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

The motion is carried.

That is the end of our meeting, but before anyone scurries off, we do need your signatures on the annual report so that we can table it. If I could just ask you to hang back a little bit until Ms. Langille circulates that, and if not I thank you. I will see you all soon, but officially here on November 4th, which is the day after my birthday - so feel free to bring presents or cake. (Laughter)

We're going to be meeting with the Entrepreneurs with Disabilities Network.

[The committee adjourned at 10:41 a.m.]