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Cape Breton-Victoria Child Advocacy Society

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COMMUNITY SERVICES COMMITTEE

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[Mr. Larry Harrison was replaced by Hon. Alfie MacLeod.]

In Attendance:

Mrs. Darlene Henry
Legislative Committee Clerk

Mr. Gordon Hebb
Chief Legislative Counsel

WITNESSES

Cape Breton-Victoria Advocacy Society

Ms. Delores Feltmate,
Chair

Ms. Anne Carlton Neil
Former child in care.



House of Assembly
Nova Scotia

HALIFAX, TUESDAY, SEPTEMBER 20, 2016

STANDING COMMITTEE ON COMMUNITY SERVICES

10:00 A.M.

CHAIRMAN
Ms. Patricia Arab

MADAM CHAIRMAN: I'd like to welcome everyone here today. My name is Patricia Arab, I'm the member for Fairview-Clayton Park and the Chair of this committee. We are the Standing Committee on Community Services.

Today we're going to be receiving a presentation from Ms. Delores Feltmate regarding the Cape Breton-Victoria Child Advocacy Society and with her today is Ms. Anne Carlton Neil, who is a former child in care.

Before we get started into our presentation, I'd like to ask our committee members to go around and introduce themselves. We can start with Mr. Maguire.

[The committee members introduced themselves.]

MR. CHAIRMAN: I'd also like to introduce Darlene Henry, who is our new committee clerk - our returning committee clerk and new again. This is her first Community Services Committee meeting with us so we're really happy to have her, and Gordon Hebb, to my right, who is our legal counsel.

I'd just like to remind our committee members, our witnesses and those in the audience watching to please have their phones switched to vibrate or turned off completely would be great, so as not to interrupt the recordings. Also a reminder that anyone who is not part of the media is unable to record or take photographs of our committee session, no matter how tempted you may be because I know we're a good-looking bunch.

This is going to be a little bit difficult because we tend to get into a nice, comfortable flow of conversation, especially once the question and answer portion begins but I would like to remind our committee members and ask our witnesses if you could wait until I recognize you before speaking, it would make it much easier for the purposes of Hansard for transcription.

With that, I will pass it off to you, Ms. Feltmate, and you can begin your presentation.

MS. DELORES FELTMATE: First of all, I want to take this opportunity to thank the committee for allowing me to come here and speak with you. Anne and I are here today to discuss the child welfare system in the Province of Nova Scotia, in particular we want to discuss with you the importance of establishing a child advocacy office.

The discussion that we will present later on will outline what a child advocacy office looks like, why it's important to all children in Nova Scotia but in particular to the most vulnerable children in Nova Scotia, some of those are children who are in the child welfare system.

Before I start I want to introduce myself. I am looking around the table - I have been here before and I think I have met most people but there are a few new faces, so I would like to tell you a little bit about who I am so you can put in context what I have to say. My name is Delores Feltmate, I am the Chair of the Cape Breton-Victoria Child Advocacy Society. I am also a foster parent. I have fostered 13 children over the last 10 years. We adopted one little girl who is going to be six next week, so I am the mother of a six-year-old and the mother of a 34-year old, I am the mother of a 33-year old and I am the mother of a six-year-old. As my husband likes to tell people, we believe in spacing our children. (Laughter)

I sat on the Minister's Advisory Committee on Children and Family Services Act for three years. Professionally I am a teacher and I taught in the public school system. For part of that time I was a guidance counsellor. Currently I facilitate evening support groups in Cape Breton for at-risk children, most of whom are on the street or are close to the street, so that's who I am.

I brought with me my friend Anne. Anne and I have known each other for 12 years. I met her when she was adopted at the age of 12. I was friends with both her mothers and they came to my house and they brought Anne, along with their multiple horde of other children, and we met. I thought it was important to bring Anne here today to speak with you because a lot of times, in my experience, when we're talking about children who have been in the system we're talking about them and we don't often get the opportunity to hear from somebody who has first-hand experience. I think that it's important that there is something - there is wisdom and there is a message that we all need to hear that can't be delivered by proxy. It needs to come directly from people who have been in the system.

I'm sitting here and it's got me - Ms. Delores Feltmate - and it's got Ms. Anne Carlton Neil and underneath her name it says, "former child in care", but I want to tell you a little bit more about Anne before I turn things over to her for a while. She is many things. She is a proficient and talented flute player. She is a self-sufficient 23-year-old who has a job and pays taxes. She is somebody who has dreams. One of her goals is to take a course in heavy duty mechanics. She loves cats. Her favorite shows are Supernatural and Grey's Anatomy. She loves her boyfriend. She is many things.

Anne and I have done presentations before, but not often do I bring her in person. Mostly I will record her because I felt very protective of her and there is a certain amount of risk when you bring personal information or when you talk about certain things. She was very insistent and very much committed to coming in person and telling her story. I think that a lot of times when we talk about issues around child welfare we're talking about statistics and it's very easy to lose the fact that there are real faces and real names behind these stories.

So not only did she want to come, and it is a very brave thing to tell your story publicly - this is a little bit of an intimidating environment, so it's a particularly brave thing on her part - on top of that, she took a day off work, which she will not get paid for to be here, so that speaks to her commitment. I said, well okay, I'll help you through your presentation. I said, tell people what brought you into the system, tell people what happened to you when you went into the system, and tell people why you want to tell them your story.

So Anne, would you like to start and tell us what brought you into the child welfare system.

MS. ANNE CARLTON NEIL: When I was a baby my birth father took me from my birth mom who he also was very abusive towards. I don't remember a whole lot prior to it, but once I was eight, my birth father married my stepmom and that's when things got drastically worse.

The emotional abuse, the physical abuse, the sexual abuse was just - I can't even always put words to it, but it's something that I would never wish on anybody. It was to the point where I was locked in my bedroom with an alarm on my door and I wasn't allowed out. If I did leave my room I was beaten severely. I was forced to use the bathroom in an ice cream container in my bedroom. If I soiled myself, I was forced to eat that. If I refused, I was again beaten beyond words. Three hundred sixty-five days a year I was forced to wear clothes that covered every inch of my body. I wasn't allowed to show any proof of what was going on at home. It was horrible.

The only way I got out was because I went to school when I was in Grade 3 and I didn't have gym clothes. I was forced to wear a pair of shorts and T-shirt which then exposed the bruises, the cuts, the marks from what my birth father did to me. That was

when I was removed from class and spent the remainder of the day in the principal's office, waiting for someone to come and take me away.

MS. FELTMATE: Do you want to tell us what happened after that, when you entered the foster care system?

MS. CARLTON NEIL: When I entered the foster care system, I was in a home for a few days, and then they removed me from that home to take me to the IWK, where I was under observation because of my injuries and because of my behaviour. I stayed there for close to a whole month before I went back. When I was in foster care, I was forced to wear diapers because I wasn't properly trained. I was in that home for a few months, and after that I was moved well over 10 times. That's not including respite care. It was definitely well over 10 times that I moved between the ages of 8 and 12, before I was then put into my forever home.

But it was always rocky in the foster care system. I never really felt like I was wanted in a home. When I was in foster care, I was afraid of knocking on the door. I never unpacked my stuff because I was scared. The little stuff that I did have fit in a garbage bag, and that's what I took from home to home to home. The clothes were never replenished. By the time I moved into my forever home, I was wearing clothes that I wore when I was 10 or 8.

It was a horrible feeling to be put in that position where I didn't have a home, where I didn't have anybody to call my own.

MS. FELTMATE: You told your story today. Why did you want to come here with me today to tell your story?

MS. CARLTON NEIL: Because I don't want this to keep happening to kids because of the way that it has affected my life. It could affect somebody else's life in a completely different way, and they may not be able to turn their life around and do the things that they want to do or to become a different person.

As I was saying to Delores, over the years that we've been doing this, it's hard to say how much longer I would have lived if I stayed in the home that I was in. It's also hard to say, if I didn't find my adoptive parents when I did, where I would be today. That can all be prevented if we have a different way of dealing with this. I don't want this to be a child's life. I don't want other kids to live and go through what I've been through.

MS. FELTMATE: I'd like you to share with the committee, what did your adoptive parents tell you when they felt you were old enough - when you were 18 or 19 - about your case?

MS. CARLTON NEIL: They told me, when I was old enough to process this information, that there had been reports that there had been calls to Community Services saying that people thought that there was abuse happening in my home, but nobody ever came to investigate it. When I found that out, it definitely struck in a place that made me very upset and very angry to know that there wasn't anybody who was coming to my rescue. I don't want that. It scares me that that could still be a potential for another kid who may not have somebody get to them in time.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Thank you so much, Anne.

MS. FELTMATE: I don't think I have to say too much. I think Anne said a lot, and I think we can all absorb and digest that. I think if you talk to anybody, whether they are in the general public or involved in the intricacy of policy planning and implementation in child welfare, you will get recognition that we have a system that is broken and we have a system that does not meet the needs of some of the most vulnerable members of our community. We are all good - and I would include myself - at pointing out problems, that's the easy part of anything. The more difficult part is pointing out solutions. That's why I want to talk to you today about the establishment of a child advocacy office.

Right now in Nova Scotia we don't have a child advocacy office. Most provinces in Canada do. Now if you were to talk to some individuals at the provincial level in the government they will tell you in fact that we have - and they would be correct - a division of the Ombudsman's Office that is devoted to dealing with issues that involve youth and children and families. That's correct, but in no way, shape or form is that the type of child advocacy office that is called for not only by myself and the board that I represent - the Cape Breton-Victoria Child Advocacy Board - but all the boards across Nova Scotia, the 11 child welfare boards that are calling for the establishment of this office.

It is not just us. It is the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child that recommends the establishment of strong children's commissioners or child advocacy offices. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child is an international treaty that we are bound by when we signed it in 1989 and we ratified it in 1991. We are bound by the different ways to deliver services to children in our communities. It is broken down along lines of provision, protection, and participation.

We do not have, like many provinces in Canada, a child advocacy office so children in the community of Nova Scotia do not have the same opportunities and advantages as children in other provinces where existing offices are operating.

The Ombudsman's Office - we're not talking about the staff - they do amazing things. The staff there is absolutely wonderful. I've had the opportunity to speak with them and to work with them. They've come and they've done presentations for us and they are amazing. But an Ombudsman's Office is a very different paradigm than a child advocacy office. An Ombudsman's Office operates after the fact and deals with complaints, whereas

a child advocacy office is proactive; it has the ability to intervene and effect change before things happen. So we have two totally different paradigms.

A child advocacy office to be effective needs to be independent of government, and needs to report directly to the Legislature - the Ombudsman's Office does do that, but it also has to be a stand-alone office. Right now we have the children's section of the Ombudsman's Office here in Nova Scotia grouped with the seniors. What we know and what you probably know, just for common sense reasons, is that whenever you put children's issues together with any other issue, the other issue takes precedence. Children's voices need to be amplified and in order for an office to be effective, it has to be a stand-alone office and we don't have that.

Another reason why the services that we have here in Nova Scotia can't really fall under the umbrella of the Ombudsman's Office is basically the mandate. The Ombudsman's Office here in Nova Scotia primarily deals with children who are in correctional facilities and children in group homes. It visits those homes, and I know in Cape Breton they came at least twice a month and they are very diligent. But they do not advocate in individual cases, they do not call for systemic reform, and they do not help shape policy. Those are all outside of their mandate.

Child advocacy offices in other provinces that have high impact and are successful in shaping policy and legislation have much broader statutory powers and have larger mandates. They are involved a lot more in raising public consciousness and engaging the community and in keeping not just child welfare accountable, but all agencies like education, justice, and mental health accountable for the services they deliver - not only to children in care, but to all children in our communities.

Resources - whenever I hear anyone say the need for resources is overstated, I usually think that's a government trying to justify why they're not going to fund something. Sometimes it is not just having more resources at our disposal, but the philosophy and the environment we work in and the leadership that is shown that will affect the outcomes and the effectiveness of offices that are dealing with children.

When we are talking about money and we are talking about resources, I think it's important to note that up until recently anyway - I've been sort of out of the loop of things for about a year - the children and youth section of the Ombudsman's Office here was funded at about \$400,000 a year, and we have a population of about one million people. I think if you compare that to, say, a province like Newfoundland and Labrador or Saskatchewan or other provinces - Manitoba maybe - that have similar populations, the funding is probably three times that.

There are eight provinces in Canada presently that have the kind of child advocacy offices operating, that have been outlined by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. Katherine Covell and Brian Howe who were at the Children's Rights Centre

in Cape Breton did a review of these offices - because it's great to have offices and it's great to have services, but you have to have benchmarks and you have to have a way to be able to determine if they actually have impact on the communities that they serve, and they found that they did.

Particularly in Saskatchewan, Manitoba, and Ontario - in B.C. - a lot of public consciousness raising and education was the result of the offices. I'll give you some examples. Saskatchewan has sparked the province-wide adoption of eight child and youth first principles based upon the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, establishing child rights and provisions for the greater protection from harm. Child poverty reduction now tops the agenda in B.C. and Saskatchewan where poverty report cards are issued.

That really speaks to me. I live in a community that has one in three children living in poverty. I think that until we start looking upstream and investing time and resources and research into what's feeding that system, we're not going to be able to address those issues in meaningful ways.

I will conclude - I'm going to give you a lot of time to ask us questions. Right now we have a child welfare system where a child in the system has a greater chance of being involved with the criminal justice system than they do in getting a high school education. We spend \$200 million a year out of our Community Service budgets - roughly about a fifth of it - and in no way, shape, or form are the outcomes for these children and families anything that would resemble the kinds of outcomes we would hope for.

The good news is that we can fix this. The good news is that we can improve things. The first step is educating the public, because political will is what shapes political policy. You have to have a body with reach and you have to have a body with power in order to do that. I think a crucial step is the establishment of this office.

I just want to make a note: I think the government is very open to the establishment of this office. Zach Churchill introduced a private member's bill, Bill No. 80, called the Child and Youth Advocate Act, on May 4, 2012, in the 4th Session of the 61st General Assembly. I think that the minister understands why these things are important. I think that it's always important to have tri-Party support in these kind of things, and it's important for all of us to encourage moves forward, particularly for children in our community whose voices need to be amplified.

Like I said, I think this is a good first step. With that, I conclude.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Thank you very much, Ms. Feltmate.

Before we get into the question-and-answer period, I really want to thank you again, Anne, for coming and for feeling that this was a safe enough environment to share your

story. I can't imagine how difficult it must have been. I was a counsellor and a teacher as well, and we don't really go about setting up a safe environment scenario when witnesses come in to speak because we really don't think about it. But I'm so happy that you were able to come in here and see that you do have people sitting around the table who are supportive and that you felt comfortable enough to share your experiences and your truth with us. It's really meaningful. It meant a lot to me, so thank you.

We're going to start our questions with Mr. Maguire.

MR. BRENDAN MAGUIRE: Thanks for coming today. Delores, it's good to see you again.

Anne, thank you for your story. I was kind of overwhelmed. I've lived some of these experiences, and I know how difficult it can be as a youth to tell your social worker or tell somebody within the system that there are issues. We all know that they have a heavy caseload, so sometimes a lot of these things slip through the cracks.

I want to say, "former" always drives me nuts because I still feel like we're all part of the system; we're all children in care. When people ask me, that's what I proudly tell them. What I try to tell people is that those who go through the system are the strongest of the strong. It took me a long time, it took me about 35 years, to realize that I have to stop letting people's decisions in the past and people's issues drag me down. You're a beautiful human being. You will succeed at everything you do. What I see as my greatest success is not this job or anything like that. What I see as my greatest success is loving my children and breaking the cycle. I don't know where you're going to go in life. Please stay in touch.

I just want to say that I would like to put a motion on the floor to send a letter to the Department of Community Services and Minister Bernard. I think it's time to start looking at these other provinces, these eight provinces, to start looking at the best practices, and see what's working and what's not working. I would like to see a thorough review and a plan to bring that information to us and bring that information forward to the public so that we can start looking into the possibility of child advocacy. Like I said, I've been in the situation and thousands of children have been in the situation where their voices are not being heard.

I don't know if I just put the official motion on the floor. I'm a little rusty, sorry; it has been a long summer. I would like to put a motion on the floor that we send a letter to the Minister of Community Services to look at the best practices, to start seeing what's working in other provinces, and maybe start going through the process of implementing this and how this would impact Nova Scotia. Are we okay with that? Do you want to add to it?

MADAM CHAIRMAN: We have a motion. Would the committee like to discuss the motion before we continue with questions? Ms. Mancini.

MS. MARIAN MANCINI: I thank you for that and I do support it. What I would like to see maybe in that letter, because I'm looking at this - I've reviewed the Hansard from 2014 when you and Mr. Reid were present, I've look at Zach Churchill's bill that he introduced in 2012. I'm going to say - no finger-pointing here, this is apolitical what I say - there was an opportunity for the previous government to maybe have acted - I'm going to say it was late in their mandate but nonetheless, what I could discern from the former minister was a keen interest in it moving forward.

Based on that and what your comments are today - and I would believe that my Progressive Conservative colleagues too would support it - what I would like to see, given the amount of effort that has been to push this through - in 2014 you were fighting fights not only in terms of getting the amendments but you were fighting this parallel to get this advocacy office. We really need it.

I looked at Ontario and what they have is amazing. I know it's money but if you get the right people - I looked at a profile of their executive director and that individual comes from a long background in dealing with youth - youth on the street, whatever. It sounded like the exceptional person that you'd want in that role. That's a little bit of what was spoken to about how we can - not just resources but getting the right person in.

I'm sorry in my ramble but what I do want to say is that in that letter I would ask that the minister consider an all-Party committee that could meet and really focus on moving this along. I just think everybody has had a hand in it at some point.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Mr. MacLeod.

HON. ALFIE MACLEOD: Thank you both for your time. Anne, your strength is unbelievable, I sit here in awe knowing what you just did, not just for yourself but for a lot of people. When I hear what Marian has to say and what Brendan has to say about where we are and what we need to do, I know there's no question in our minds that this is something that needs to move forward.

I would like it to be a little stronger and actually put a timeline in it as to when a response could be expected because all governments, it doesn't matter which stripe you are talking about, our fame is going to consultants and moving forward. There is a former Premier of this province, one of his sayings was: It's never the wrong time to do the right thing. So even though it has been started in 2014 and Zach had some ideas earlier than that, I think we really need to start putting a timeline on it.

The idea of a tri-Party is the right way to go because this is an issue that affects every Nova Scotian. If you really think about what we're doing here, we're talking about the future of our province and how to make this province a better place for everyone to live. I think we need to work together to do that and I think we need to really put the feet

to the fire and ask for timelines instead of just saying oh yes, we're going to do that. No, let's be very specific about it.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Mr. Maguire.

MR. MAGUIRE: I agree with all of it. I would also throw in that maybe we do a review of Mr. Churchill's Private Member's Bill, we could throw that in there. I agree 100 per cent that it's MLA after MLA and minister after minister and government after government. We sit here and we talk about how we're going to do things differently and how things are going to change and we're back here again.

I'm in favour of a timeline, I'm in favour of reviewing Ontario, B.C., all of them, to see what's going on. This can't be a five-year review, it can't be a three-year review. There are children in this situation right now that one day, one hour is going to potentially make the difference in their life.

I think if everybody is comfortable, that we put it to a vote. So included in it is, if I get this right - I don't know how we come up with timelines but we definitely want a reasonable timeline. We want a review of some of the other provinces like Ontario, as Ms. Mancini said, and finding the right person for it - someone who understands youth in care and who has the experience to do this and start taking a look at some of these Private Members' Bills that were put forward and let's get this ball rolling.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Mr. MacLeod.

MR. MACLEOD: I appreciate what you said. I guess in my head, it shouldn't be that hard to put a timeline on it simply because this is not a new subject; it didn't just fall out of the sky. There's a lot of information already in place. People have been looking at this situation and these questions for a period of time. It's not like we're recreating the wheel. The wheel has been started; unfortunately, the spokes haven't been put into it yet. But there's a lot of information that is there so a timeline of three to six months is not an unreasonable amount of time to take the information that was already known, put it together, and let's move forward.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Mr. Maguire, if you could actually put forward your motion again and incorporate the discussion that we've just had so that we have it a little bit more formalized.

MR. MAGUIRE: Let's see if we can get all of this in there. We are looking at requesting of the Department of Community Services and the Minister of Community Services in a letter - we would like the department to look into best practices from all provinces, a review of the impact that this would have on the children in our communities.

We would like a reasonable timeline - I would say six months maximum is what we're looking at here - and a review of the Private Member's Bill that was presented by Minister Churchill, and actually looking at the right person to do this job. That could mean bringing in somebody from outside. We have a lot of experience here in Halifax and Nova Scotia - be it HomeBridge or Phoenix House or something like that. So bringing in the right person, an apolitical person, but also striking up a committee to review this from all three Parties and making sure that all three Parties have an equal voice in this.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: So we have a wordy motion, but I think it covers everything. I think we can draft that into a pretty good letter to send off to the department.

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

The motion is carried.

Now we are going to continue with questions, if that's all right - Ms. Feltmate.

MS. FELTMATE: One of the things I would like to add is - of course we want to do this because it is the moral, it is the ethical, it is the right thing, it is the right thing - like Mr. MacLeod said - the future of our children. I also want to bring to your attention the fact that for every high-risk child that enters the criminal justice system it costs the community \$3.7 million. So not only is this the moral and the ethical thing to do - in a province that is strapped for cash, it is also the pragmatic thing to do.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Mr. MacLeod.

MR. MACLEOD: How do you follow that? (Laughter) The passion that you have for this is very evident, and I've said it before and I'll say again that I certainly don't want to be somebody that's on the wrong side of you - for many reasons, but the biggest one of course is that where you're heading is the right direction for our province.

I'm just wondering about the Auditor General's Report and the Ombudsman's report - how did they line up with your experience and understanding of how the child welfare system is working today? It has been identified several times in the Auditor General's Report. It has been identified in the Ombudsman's report, and you mentioned about how when it gets mixed in with other things, the child is the one that seems to suffer. So I'm just wondering if you have some thoughts on what we should be looking at here that we can also relay to the department so that they understand - because I'm pretty sure that you've thought about this.

MS. FELTMATE: I have. First a disclaimer - I consider myself part of the child welfare system. I have been a foster parent for 10 years and I have fostered 13 children. So when I'm critical of the system, I sincerely mean that I'm not directing this to individuals

within the system. We all know how systems and cultures create outcomes and what I've often said is all new people but same outcomes, if we don't do things differently.

If you look at the Auditor General's Report on child welfare in Nova Scotia in 2013 and if you looked at the Child Death Review report, the Ombudsman's report in 2014, what would strike me, Mr. MacLeod, that meshes with my experience is the inconsistency in service delivery, the breakdown in communications, the inability of our system to recalibrate, and the inability of our system to learn from past mistakes and inform future decisions. It is a crisis-driven system that is speeding full-power ahead but we haven't done the work to research what really is effective. The best outcome for children is to grow up in their families of origin.

What's unique about Anne's experience is not that child abuse exists because I think somewhere along the line, because children are entitled these days because you can call Children's Aid if your mother doesn't give you the second sundae, that's the impression. The reality is, and it's gut-wrenching and I wish I didn't know what I know - it's like *The Matrix* in that I wish I could take the other pill. What I know is that child abuse is not something that went out of fashion 60 years ago. It exists in our community, it is prevalent, and we do not have a system in place that operates in a way that improves the outcome for the children who need it.

My experience has been that those who can benefit most by the services do not qualify for services - it's a threshold system. My experience has been that those most broken, the majority of resources are inconsistently resourced. My experience has been that we evaluate families with supervision and support, and then we take it all away and return children. My experience has been - and this is echoed through those two reports - that we know you can't move children 10 times. If nothing else had happened to this child, the fact that she had to pack her bag every night because she didn't know if they were coming in the middle of the night to get her, if she had not been sexually abused, physically abused, emotionally abused, that experience alone would traumatize her for life.

We know that children in the system have come out of it with post-traumatic stress disorder at twice the rates of war veterans. There are children who come through this like Mr. Maguire said - they're strong and they thrive and they go on to do amazing things, a lot of children do. But it's not just about beating the system or beating the odds, it's about changing the odds. Right now it's breakdowns in communication, policies that are not adhered to, lack of accountability, misunderstanding and different interpretations of what policy means - incredibly slow processes for children whose lives operate at a different level and the inability to deal with what has happened to them in a timely fashion.

She didn't get counselling, she didn't get the resources she needed. What is unique about her situation isn't so much that she experienced child abuse, it is that she was adopted at 12 because that doesn't happen; that is so rare. We fail to act quickly enough and we leave children in a system and then, not because of anything that is innately wrong with

them but because of the damages they incur, nobody wants them - they have trouble, they have issues. They are wonderful, beautiful people who with the right supports can go on and do amazing things. But it takes effort and it takes resource and it takes being honest, and it takes recognizing it.

One thing I will give this government credit for - I will give them credit - is we're finally saying oh yes, this isn't working. I've been doing this for 10 years and all I got - see, I'm getting mad now - what I usually got was all the good things we're doing. I was on the front line and people like Anne - see, I can't tell you about my 13 children because I've signed a confidentiality form, and neither can any other foster parent. They can't tell you. But her story is not unique, and you need to hear this when this is showing up on your door. Do you know why she didn't go back to her father? Not because they weren't going to put her back, but because he moved and didn't want to pursue anymore.

Those are the kinds of things that I've known and anybody who's involved in the system knows. Those are the kind of things that are reflected in the Auditor General's Report. Those are the kind of things that are reflected in the Ombudsman's report. We can do, or we cannot do, but we can't say we don't know anymore. That was a long answer.

MR. MACLEOD: Thank you for the answer. Where I was going with my next question is recently there was a report on CTV about a foster parent who was going around and basically saying that the system is in crisis, and a lot of what you've just described is part of that crisis. I'm sure you've seen that report, and I'm just wondering if you have any further thoughts that you'd like to add for the education of us who aren't as well versed in the subject as you are. I know from my own personal experience that every time I talk with you I certainly learn a lot more about what's wrong.

You pointed out in your opening remarks that we're all good at pointing out what's wrong, but unless we understand what's wrong, it's very, very hard to find a fix to this situation, a system that's in crisis. When the foster parents start speaking out, it tells me there are real challenges and real worries. I'm just wondering if there's anything you could elaborate on in that respect.

MS. FELTMATE: I can elaborate, and I'll try to elaborate a little less with this answer. I did see that report. I think what the woman in the report - who I do not know - who is a foster parent here in Nova Scotia was talking about was the lack of foster parents here in the province. If you speak to those who talk about this issue, what they will tell you, and it is accurate, is that there is a dwindling amount of foster parents in this province because most of them are like me - I'm 54. We're older, and we ourselves are sort of aging out of the system. There's usually two working parents; there's not a lot of stay-at-home parents to be able to do this. Therefore, we have a recruitment problem. When we have, and I'm aware of at least some instances, five children with high needs in one home, it's because we don't have foster parents to be able to provide the interim care.

What I would say to that is that's true. All of that is true. But that is not why we don't have enough foster parents in this province. We don't have a recruitment issue; we have a retention issue. There are enough foster parents in this province who offer their services, who want to do this. I can guarantee you, despite what you may believe, they're not doing it for the \$17.50 a day and three clothing allowances through the year. They're doing it for the same reason anyone who volunteers does: they care about children, they think they have something to offer, they think it matters, and they think they can make a difference.

We get all the foster parents we need, but they don't stay. For some, it's an excruciatingly difficult thing because basically if you're in this in good faith, what you're trying to do is you're pulling for the family, and you're trying to provide stability for the child, but that child is going to leave you, and that's the understanding. Not everybody can do that.

But they just did an overview called the dialogue with foster parents here in Nova Scotia, and this research is pretty much the same across Canada. When they found out why most foster parents leave, it is not because of those reasons. Most foster parents leave because of issues with the government and the agenda, as represented through the agency, so it's conflicts. If you were to have foster parents here, and they're not always allowed to speak freely, but if they were here and if you looked at the Dialogue with Foster Parents report, what you would find is they feel incredibly disrespected in what they are doing by the people who administer the system, and I can echo that feeling.

The disrespect shows itself in ways like coming to pick a child up and moving them without telling you. All the decisions are being made for them without your consultation - not giving you information. When you're a foster parent, you function in the same legal realm as a daycare worker - you have to have the permission of the agency to do anything, which is really difficult if you can't contact anybody or nobody returns your call, so your whole life is on the line. It's all outlined, it's all detailed.

So we need foster care. There will always be a need for foster care. We do not have enough foster parents. We have a dwindling supply of foster parents. The reason we have a dwindling supply is partially because of the changing demographics of our community, but the largest reason that the research shows us is because of the relationship with the agency, so we need to work on that. I think we are - I think we're starting to.

To her credit, Denise Peterson-Rafuse was the first person who really acknowledged this, and she implemented the dialogue with foster parents and brought out a lot of these issues.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Ms. Mancini.

MS. MANCINI: First I just want to make a comment addressed to Ms. Neil. I come from a background of a child protection lawyer. I represented parents over the years, and did it for a long time, and I saw a cycle. I was there long enough that I not only represented the parents - I would eventually represent the child who would be in the youth court system, and then I would represent them when their children went into care. There was clearly a cycle of violence. I would get the information and I would know what the allegations were of the type of abuse. I will say that your case is one of the harshest that I have come in contact with. I've seen some pretty bad cases.

I just want to say to you here - because you were brave enough to come forward - so many people didn't make it. I know you know that. There are faults with whether what kinds of services they got - maybe what types of families and all of the things that you experienced with the moving, the moving, the moving. All of those things set people back and kept them in the cycle, but you haven't - it's something within you. I just want to say to you that I think I'm in awe of you, I really am. Because it's not all of the other things that went wrong - it's in you and you pulled it out. So I congratulate you for that, I really do.

Ms. Feltrate, I did want to ask a little bit because I do refer to the general pattern, and you were nodding your head so you do understand that. For the most part it's a cycle and much, of course, what I would have seen would have been a cycle of poverty to add to the challenges that people are facing - whether they're parents or children, and here today we're really focused on the children.

You alluded briefly to that - and I'm assuming you're still the chair of the advocacy board so you would have some contact with it anyway, but the recent rates report that we got with regard to the poverty rates in Cape Breton were really astounding. I'm reading recent reports where there are 4,000 less jobs in Cape Breton so there are some serious economic issues going on - the child poverty report by Lesley Frank. I'm wondering, in your role as the chair of the child advocacy board, what impact are you seeing tied into this on children in Cape Breton?

MS. FELTRATE: Child poverty, outside of abuse, outside of any other factor is a risk factor for children. Children who live in poverty are children who are at risk. When you live in a community like I do where one in three children is living in poverty, the outcomes spill across almost every venue of life. When you have that kind of poverty, you have increased mental health issues. When you have that kind of poverty, you have increased substance abuse. When you have that kind of poverty, you have increased domestic violence. When you have that kind of poverty, all those social ills go together and they create a climate that is ripe for the development of many social ills and child abuse is one of them.

I grew up in Glace Bay. It was a blue-collar, working class community when I lived there. Everybody's dad had a job - it might have been the fish plant, it might have been the

coal mines - both my grandfathers were coal miners - it might have been the heavy water plant or, if you were really lucky, you got to work at the steel mill in Sydney, before we knew about environmental stuff. It is not the same community anymore.

I know exactly what you speak to, Ms. Mancini. I run a group for high-risk - I say "kids" but my kids are 18- to 30-year olds who are on or are close to the street. I don't think it comes as any surprise that the majority of people in the prisons today and the majority of people who are homeless and on the street have come through the foster care system. What I see are individuals who did not have the opportunities that other children in Canada have had, did not have the supports and did not have the ability to break the cycle.

Of my group, half of them are parents themselves. I will tell you they love their children every bit as much as you love your children but they don't have the resources. I don't mean just financial resources, I mean the thing that happens to you when you grow up through this. I think it's really telling what Mr. Maguire said and I know how profoundly true it is. The most powerful thing about breaking the cycle is the ability to parent your own children. You would have seen and I know that there's a revolving door to these cases and there are families - until you come in and break the cycle, then you end up with the next generation. That's one of the things Anne and I have talked about, and the other children I know who have been through the system - what do you think will make the difference, or what did you need to happen?

One thing I will say is her situation is horrific and it's graphic in lots of ways that are very disturbing to us. But the abuse, the neglect part, the emotional terror part, the abuses that the system has heaped upon her - even her situation was very similar to two children I had. It is certainly difficult and there are milder situations, but I don't think it's unique unfortunately.

I think that's the question we all have to ask ourselves and I think it's the core of this, what do we do to break this cycle? Certainly a child advocate could be part of the solution because when we're looking at poverty, again we have to look upstream, not downstream. We have to know what is feeding this and until we start to address some of those issues then we're going to continue to suffer the repercussions.

MS. MANCINI: Just as a follow-up to that, and I think you probably addressed the second point of my question, our statistics are showing us that in 2015, over 13,000 children were using food banks and there has been a dramatic increase even since 2015, a 20 per cent increase in the overall usage.

Recently in Dartmouth, the Dartmouth North Community Centre sponsored a fantastic event where they brought in all the elementary schools and focused on a very blunt issue that people don't want to talk about, that's kids hungry in the classroom in the morning and trying to address those issues. It was astounding, I think it was something like

90 per cent of the teachers surveyed felt that hunger was a factor that affected kids' learning in the classroom and that's unbelievable.

I noted an article that was in the *Cape Breton Post* back in March 2014. Peggy Vassallo said - this is her quote in the paper: "Sometimes there is just not enough in the family for the adolescent to be supported and sometimes it is the adolescent that has to pay the price and leave the home because really truly there isn't enough food, there isn't enough to go around."

I don't know if you can get a blunter statement than the one that she made. I mentioned before, I looked at the Ontario model and some of what their mandate is and their child advocacy office, and my question to you is, how could a child advocacy office help that situation and bring forward that issue?

MS. FELTMATE: Peggy Vassallo is a wonderful woman who opened Access 808, which was a centre for at-risk youth, and Peggy is a member of my child welfare board in Cape Breton at the time.

I think that there are a variety of ways that community groups can address the issues that their communities grapple with. We have a grassroots understanding of the issues in our community. We have the ability to - and I think originally that's why these child welfare boards were formulated: to have a direct line of communication to the minister to talk about what was going on in their community.

I think in Nova Scotia, I read an article by Paul Bennett and I think he said at that time - I think it was 2014 - that one in eight children in Nova Scotia lived in poverty. I know that the United Church many years back did a one in six project of the amount of children who live in poverty, but in Cape Breton, one in three.

So a child growing up in Glace Bay - my beautiful hometown - is going to have a very different experience than maybe a child growing up in Chester. I think that grassroots groups like child welfare boards can engage the community, mobilize the community, bring the issues to government, and lobby for policy, systemic, and legislative changes that address the issue.

I think we have a fundamental understanding of the drivers in the system. I think we have first-hand experience of what it looks like, what it smells like, and what it tastes like. Then groups like ours are not beholden to anyone because we can speak with an authentic voice and reflect what's happening. So public consciousness raising and advocating at the provincial level, and then in my child advocacy board there are 10 members, so we do the educational piece and the advocacy piece. But Peggy is one of our members and she serves in all areas of the community, as does every member who's on the committee, in very real ways.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: I have a quick question, with the permission of the committee, if I could ask it from here. I want to go back to the conversation you were having about the retention of foster parents. As I mentioned, I worked as a teacher and then as a guidance counsellor, and I worked in rural Nova Scotia. I wanted to take everybody home with me. I wanted to figure out a way to open up a group home or a halfway house or somewhere where most of them could just come and get a meal or have a safe place to sleep.

It was always the kids who were on the fringe - not enough to call social services, but you knew that they weren't going back into a healthy environment. It was really hard to find parents who were co-operative. They didn't trust when I told them I didn't blame them and it wasn't about them being bad parents - it was about working together to try to make a situation better and support each other.

One of the main reasons I had to leave elementary guidance in particular - and also hesitated with foster parenting - is because of the lack of consultation. I was a counsellor and I had certain people who would come and discuss the children with me, but when it came to DCS and other agencies, nobody told me anything. Confidentiality - I wasn't allowed.

So you have a team of people working around this child. You have social workers, you have counsellors, you have school psychologists, and you have all the Community Services-based people, and sometimes Justice. All these people whose main goal is to support this child, yet they can't speak to each other.

My question to you, if you are able to answer it is, how can and would a child advocacy office be able to break down that lack of communication while keeping confidentiality, while keeping the respect for that individual's privacy?

MS. FELTMATE: I'll start back a little bit from that. In 2014, the Ombudsman's Office issued the call for many changes in the child welfare system through their Child Death Review. They made these recommendations and they sent them to the department.

Every one of those recommendations for changes was accepted. Through the Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act, a reporter found out that all of the recommendations except one were being implemented, which was news to the Ombudsman's Office. The one recommendation not being implemented was the establishment of an independent Child Death Review Panel that would operate outside the department and that would release its findings to the public. Although they had agreed that what came out of this Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act was that that actually was not going to happen.

In 2015, if you are aware, there was another child who died in the system. I think the Ombudsman - I don't know what her motivation was, but I know she was very

concerned that these deaths were not reviewed. This isn't attaching blame, it just means that in our system we need a system to break down confidentiality and to review and to release it to the public, and the public has a right to public scrutiny to see if these things are okay.

I talked to Ms. Brennan the other day and I asked her if she was comfortable that this was going to be established. She is comfortable, she thinks that now we are going to do that. That's what the Ombudsman's Office did. If she didn't exist and if that pressure wasn't put there, maybe it wouldn't have followed through that it was going to be established.

As I said, she's operating in a different paradigm than a child advocacy office would do. So they would have statutory powers and ability to report directly to the Legislature, the ability to open things up for the public to review. Anything I know, statistic-wise or research-wise, comes out of B.C. because they have an awesome child advocate who does the research, that releases it to the public, that informs the public. Now they have a report card on child poverty which keeps governments accountable.

That would be an example of how an office could bridge confidentiality, put pressure where pressure is needed and keep governments accountable.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Ms. Treen.

MS. JOYCE TREEN: Thank you for your presentation and thanks for telling your story. It took me half an hour before I could speak, to think as a parent what you went through, so my heart goes out to you.

I'm wondering if you might be able to describe through all your research and all your knowledge and of course hopefully having a government review, but in your opinion what do you think this advocacy office would look like? How do you think it would function? How do you think it needs to work?

MS. FELTMATE: I think I would have to echo a lot of what Ms. Mancini said. I think the Ontario office is an excellent prototype. I think the Saskatchewan office has much we can borrow from, as do the B.C. and New Brunswick as well. But an office would look like this: an office that functioned well and could create the kind of results we would want would probably operate on a budget of probably about \$1.5 million. More is always better but they've had good results in provinces similar to our size with that kind of budget.

Again, it would be an office that was independent from government. That has to be important. You can't be afraid to say things. I can say things, but if you're in that system, you can't. You have to be able to be authentic. Your voice has to be authentic.

You have to be exclusively focused on children because whenever we put children's issues with other issues, they do not make the front page. We all know about Yarmouth ferries and tax credits and those economic issues. It's really, really hard to get any kind of coverage on these issues. It's really hard to amplify children's voices in this way. They would have to be accessible to children. Children have to know they're there, and they have to be able to go to those places, and those offices have to be able to advocate for children on a provincial level or on a federal level, but also on a local level.

It would have to have a wide mandate. Right now, they do a wonderful job at the Ombudsman's Office, but they're almost exclusively focused on children in group homes and children in correctional facilities. They would have to have broad advocacy functions and strong statutory powers.

Here's where you're really important: there would have to have a receptive political culture. These are not pleasant things. Her story is gut-wrenching. I'd rather be talking about other things than this, and I wish I didn't know some of the things I know. But we have to, and you have a responsibility. You have the ability to effect the change; you have the ability to create the culture. You have to be receptive to these messages.

It would need resources. Although like I said - and I sound like a government person, and I'm not - resources can be overstated. If we get the right leadership, and if we get the right climate, then we can do amazing things.

That's what an office would look like. Those that have created that have created the best outcomes for children, in the system, outside of the system, in all areas where we deliver children's services.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Mr. Orrell.

MR. EDDIE ORRELL: Delores, it's always a pleasure to see someone speak so passionately about something they really believe in and to be part of hopefully fostering change in the province.

I want to go back to your talk about the deaths of children, deaths in care. In listening to Anne's story, we know there have to be mental health issues involved in that. Are we doing all we can do to (1) protect children in care and otherwise, and (2) to make sure that mental and physical health - whatever issues - are being addressed? Can we do more?

MS. FELTMATE: The answer to are we doing enough is no. The answer to can we do more is yes. There are some issues in this world that we probably don't have the ability to make an impact on. This is not one of those issues. If we change things, and if we do things differently, we can change the outcomes in this system.

One of the things the provincial government is doing now that they hadn't done before is they are starting to measure outcomes, and they're building in benchmarks. I think that's important because you need to know if what you're doing is effective. My belief is that the best-case scenario for children is if they can be raised in their family of origin. If we can put in supports - real supports, not Band-aid stuff, real support - and stay with people past reunification, and in many, many circumstances prevent those children from coming into the system, we will get good outcomes.

I have to be really careful of what I say because I signed confidentiality stuff. I'm going to give you an example of how we can do things differently. Let's just say there was this foster parent name Doris who lived somewhere, and she had foster children and the mother was very young, and she had four children by the time she was 20 years old. Although that mother didn't live on Reserve, there was a legacy of residential abuse; she had a grandparent who grew up in First Nation residential schools, and that residential abuse was passed down and it destroyed generations of parenting. That young mother loved her children and was on her own and had no supports, and she became involved with older men who abused her. There was a lot of domestic violence in the home and the children were privy to this domestic violence, and child welfare got involved.

I'm not saying this is me. I'm just saying this is a situation I know about. Child welfare came and took the children and placed the children in foster homes. They worked with this mother and got her some support services. This mother didn't do drugs. This mother loved her children. This mother wanted to do the best that she could for her children and they got her some support services and they were about to return her children.

One of the children was really starting to exhibit some attachment disorder stuff because he had been moved at that point - I think he had been moved at that point six times, and she was two. The mother's support came through income assistance and her child tax credit. When her children went into care she didn't get that money anymore. So they were about to place the children back with this mother. The person who knew these children knew that one of the children was particularly susceptible to developing attachment issues and could not stand another move. So this needed to work.

Because the mother had no money, she couldn't pay her rent, and when she couldn't pay her rent, just before they were about to return her children they were going to evict her. So somebody called child welfare and said, can you please help find this woman a decent place to live because her children are going to be returned in a matter of days. She's going to be evicted and you're going to go and take the children again. The response was, well that would be enabling bad behaviour on her part. I'm not saying that would be every worker's response - somebody might be more empathetic and somebody else might respond differently.

So something did happen and the mother did get a place to live and she got her children and whatnot, but the potential of what could have happened was that the child

would go back and we would take them again instead of just helping that woman find an apartment. It made absolutely no sense to the person who told me the story.

Those are the kinds of things that are outside of even resourcing our system differently - like our understanding of how we support people and what we need to do.

MR. ORRELL: If I could, another one.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Sure. We're mindful of the time. We're going to have to stop at 11:30 a.m. and I would like to give all the committee members a chance to ask at least one question. So if you could just maybe keep it quick.

MR. ORRELL: Yes, quick. Back last year we saw the suicide of a young person who was university age. Knowing that mental health issues were involved and we know that the Youth Secretariat has been active in our province for a while, do you see the role of secretariat as being a voice for young people? Should we push the Legislature or legislation to require this Youth Secretariat to become active again that would help in issues like we talked about here and having a voice, while we're waiting for the advocate to be put in place?

MS. FELTMATE: Mental health is a big issue in child welfare and it's a big issue in our community. We all have family members who deal with mental health issues and I would dare say there's not one family that doesn't. We know that accessing service in a timely fashion to address those needs is certainly an issue.

I think that absolutely everything we can do to raise consciousness, to raise political awareness, and to engage the community in these issues can't help but create a more receptive political climate, and that will result in better servicing and hopefully better outcomes.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Ms. Eyking.

MS. PAM EYKING: Thank you so much for educating us here today. Anne, thank you - like Joyce, it took me a little while to compose myself but I think I'm going to lose it here. At the end of the day I like to count my blessings and today I'm going to count a blessing that I met you, Anne. Your spirit and your strength is something we can all commend and that is your blessing, your strength and your spirit.

Listening to your story, as you grew older and you were told about your abuse, one of the biggest issues was that it had been reported and it wasn't investigated. Every minute a child is in abuse is two minutes too long.

I guess my question is to Delores. Have you seen any improvements in response to reports over the past 10 or 15 years?

MS. FELTMATE: No. I think it's a really difficult situation and I empathize with child care workers in that position. They have two competing sets of needs. We know the foster care system is not where we want children to be. I loved my children, I cared for them but - not because I am not lovely, I am - the very nature of the situation, the temporariness, the packing of your suitcase every night not knowing what the knock at the door is, is hard on children.

Foster care was designed to be temporary and I think because it is really gut-wrenching to take children from their parents, what we've done sometimes is have that be the intermediate decision. Maybe we haven't been invested enough in trying to really support struggling families either and that has been the intermediate answer.

I think I have never met in my life a child care worker who does not sincerely want to do the best for the children they are working with. When they go into the home I think they are pulling for the best outcome and they are trying to resolve situations in the home. They may not have the complete picture of what's going on but I think they are trying to make that situation work.

I think that in the past we had this idea of bad parents/good child and just take the child, and we knew that wasn't in anybody's best interests. We knew that the better thing to do and the thing that would create better outcomes was if we could work with that family and support that family - not just because we're wonderful, moral, ethical people but because it's better for our community, that we'll get a better outcome. So in between trying to work with the family there's another competing set of needs, that child is being shaped right then and there by those experiences and there is an immediacy to what is happening to them. If we don't intervene in a timely fashion, there's no such thing as too late but there's such a thing as almost too late. Then we create a whole other set of scenarios.

I don't think we intervene slowly because we don't care, I think we intervene because we are trying to accomplish two things at one time. My personal experience - and it is not everybody else's and it is not everybody else's philosophy - is that we wait too long, that it is not the children's needs that are driving the system, and that we allow children to get in such a state and condition that none of us can survive without huge repercussions, where it's almost impossible for them to go on - not always, like I said, there are beat-the-odds stories, but almost impossible for them to go on and to create a normal family life.

We have to get in there earlier; I truly believe this. You have to intervene early, you have to serve generously and you have to act decisively. I do not think that is the model we follow. I do think we are aware now of issues, I do think we are moving in a direction that hopefully we're going to make some positive changes.

MS. EYKING: How would you see an advocate being able to improve in those responses, this response time in going into a home and investigating, at least initially

investigating? Every report should be investigated, in my mind, how would you see them playing a role in that?

MS. FELTMATE: They would keep governments accountable. One of the things, you had, in March of this year, the department coming to a presentation. One of the fears when we changed the legislation was there was going to be this influx of children into the system. I'm a foster parent, and I have good friends who are foster parents. There's not a doubt in my mind that what we are doing now is not meeting the needs of children in the system, and there need to be incredible improvements. What is worse, leaving the child in the abuse situation or putting them in this foster care system that moves them 10 times?

There was this fear that when we changed the legislation that we were going to have this influx. One thing that I constantly hear when I hear other people give reports is the reassurance that we're not going to take children; we're just not going to take them. If we cannot, we should not. If it costs us resources to stabilize families, that's a good investment in our community. But if we need to, we need to, and we need to quickly.

An advocate could highlight the most current scientific consensus on research about what is in the child's best interest. They could educate the public, they could help shape policy, and they could help shape the implementation of policy. That's what they've done in other provinces.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Mr. Maguire, very quickly, one question.

MR. MAGUIRE: I've got more than one.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: We only have time for one.

MR. MAGUIRE: When you talk about the movement, I just wanted to say that some of the stuff that people don't talk about is what those children are learning, which is a lack of trust in adults. It makes children feel alone, and it makes them feel unloved at a time in their life when they should be learning life skills. Instead of concentrating on, where's my next place, they should be outside playing and doing all this stuff. So it does have an impact.

I have a ton of questions, but I'm sure you and I will talk again. You talked about foster parents being disrespected and decisions being made without the foster parent's input. This has been going on forever; I mean, forever. I remember a situation 25 or 30 years ago with a foster parent. When I came home at lunch, my backs were packed. I said, what in the hell happened? They said, your social worker called today, and said you're being moved. There was no input; there was nothing. The situation was a great place. We were temporarily moved out of the house, a fight happened, and we were moved back in.

I'm not blaming the social worker because it is probably one of the most difficult jobs, especially social workers who come into homes and take children and are responsible for those children. But I remember Ruby saying, they're just not listening. Nobody's listening to me. Before she passed, she probably had at least 40 children come in and out of that house.

What is stopping this? We've been talking about this forever. I have to say it's one of the more frustrating parts of being an MLA, we keep saying, we've been talking about this forever. It's not like these issues are new issues. Whether it's in Community Services, whether it's in Education and Early Childhood Education, or whether it's in Health and Wellness, these are not new issues. The only difference is who's on what side of the aisle and who's pointing fingers and who's not pointing fingers.

Why are we still talking about the lack of inclusion of foster parents when it comes to the decision-making process? We expect them to clothe these children. We expect them to protect these children. We expect them to correct the wrongs that others have put on them and fix the scars. But when it comes to whether they are going to stay with you or these services that they need, they don't have a voice. What in the hell is happening?

MS. FELTMATE: You've made me think, Brendan, about one of - I won't give a name, but . . .

MR. MAGUIRE: Oh, give names.

MS. FELTMATE: Somebody in foster care at a provincial level said, after this Dialogue with Foster Parents came out, and these issues were highlighted again, and you couldn't say it was just this person saying this because now we had a scientific consensus - one of the foster parents was a statistician with a doctorate and could actually make it make sense. Anyway, when all this happened, someone at the provincial level said to me, well, Delores, we can't make people be nice to each other.

I thought, wow, you just don't get it. You just don't get it. First of all, we can; it's called human rights. Second of all, you may be fine with that, but when Sally has to go in a home with six other kids because there's no other place, or they're in a hotel because there's no other place, with workers changing every six hours, we need a better answer than, Delores, we just can't make people be nice to each other.

Again, I give real credit to Denise Peterson-Rafuse because she was the one that implemented the study and she took it out of the back rooms and highlighted it. So when you hear people tell you that the problem of the declining amount of foster parents in the province is because we have a recruitment issue, you tell them, no, it's because we have a retention issue.

MR. MAGUIRE: What's happening, especially with children in care and people on income assistance is we're creating the second class citizen where people are begging for things like basic human rights. I just want to ask you - I was actually probably in my early teenage years when my social worker was changed to a lady named Charmaine Tanner who is fantastic - she just retired. When I got elected she was the first person to call me actually - and she's an NDPer. (Laughter) She was a fantastic social worker.

Has the policy changed now - that you don't have a social worker for x-amount of years? Someone told me that the social workers are changing. They change the social worker every three years or two years or five years, and so you don't actually get that - when a child is being moved from place to place, one of the comforting things when you're being moved from a stranger's home - and it's a stranger's home into another stranger's home - was that drive.

So I would be in the car with Charmaine. Charmaine would say, okay, listen, call me, this that and the other thing, and just for that moment of fear because you were scared and you didn't know what was going to happen, I had Charmaine Tanner and I knew that things were going to be okay. She knew everything about me. We had a personal relationship. Sometimes she would just show up and take us out for ice cream - my sister and I. Is it true that social workers are being rotated out now so there are no personal relationships?

MS. FELTMATE: There is a huge change of social workers. Very quickly, because I know you are time-crunched, the entry level for child welfare tends to be the ickiest part of the job, which is the child welfare part. You're dealing with the courts and you're dealing with the families and you're seeing a lot of scary stuff and it's very emotionally driven. That's a really tough thing, and there is a lot of burn-out and there is a lot of movement.

Your first job in child welfare for most people is the protection, which is the toughest, most important part of it and you've got 26-year-olds and 28-year-olds with not a lot of experience often filling those positions. If they can get out, a lot of times they can and they'll move to a different part in the system. It's a tough, tough job they have and they can't do right, no matter what, whether they are too soon, too late, not enough.

I can tell you that my children - I don't think one of them ever had the same social worker for any length of time. I think there was always change. We deal with three different ones right now because of the way it's structured, but I won't get into that. Maybe another time. That is important, what you say - you need that continuity, you need that safe place and that safe person, and it doesn't really exist.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Thank you. Mr. MacLeod.

MR. MACLEOD: I'll make it a quick snapper. You and your group were very forceful in the change of the legislation when it came to the definition of a child. Now we

know that children between 16 and 19 are recognized. I'm just wondering if you and your organization have seen any difference for that age bracket since that law has been passed.

MS. FELTMATE: No, not yet. I think they're still working on policy, but what I do - because I work with street kids and they know I'm in the position sometimes to have to go to income assistance or other places to try to get services for my pregnant 17-year-old or whatever, what it does at least now is give us some leverage to bargain for these things.

I have gone and showed up at the doors with kids who are 16, 17, 18 years old - who are sleeping in cars, who are pregnant, who have been beaten and sexually abused at home, and I've been turned away from services. I couldn't get services for those kids. So now we have leverage and I think it will move into where we'll be able to provide for them, but we have to keep everybody accountable.

MR. MACLEOD: So it needs to be proclaimed.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Ms. Mancini.

MS. MANCINI: It's just a quick comment because I did want to respond to what Mr. Maguire said. It's just interesting to have discovered this piece of information but the situation with the students who are studying at the School of Social Work, at least here, I have been told from a pretty reliable source that they have one course (Interruption) No, it wasn't Maureen, it was more recent than since she has been there. There is only one course on this type of child protection.

MS. FELTMATE: It's an elective.

MS. MANCINI: Yes, and when they come out they are looking for jobs and this is where they can get the jobs. So it is entry-level, very inexperienced, no background. I think that's something that could really be explored at some other level because it shouldn't be too complicated to start looking at changing their curriculum a little bit there.

The other thing I just wanted to say, too, is that with the new amendments the foster parents - I think it's Section 20 - they do have the right, if they've had a child for over six months, to get some status in the court and to intervene.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Thank you. Ms. Feltmate, if you just want to take a few minutes for closing remarks.

MS. FELTMATE: I can't tell you how encouraged I am by your response. I really feel - I sincerely feel that I'm going to leave here and there's going to be follow-up. I could tell that you cared, and you caring matters. You have the ability to make the kind of changes and to do the kinds of things that are going to impact the system. I do feel comfortable. I

never say this to politicians because I never feel comfortable, but I do feel comfortable that there will be something positive that comes out of it. My experience with this minister is that she is on board with this. I certainly think she would appreciate encouragement and support, and I've seen it all around the table.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Thank you so much. Thank you to you, and thank you to Ms. Carlton Neil for coming, and you certainly were worth the wait. It took us a while to get you here but we're very happy that we finally have you in front of us.

We do have committee business to move on to. We'll just take maybe a two-minute break and come back at 11:39 a.m.

[11:37 a.m. The committee recessed.]

[11:40 a.m. The committee reconvened.]

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Order, please. I call the meeting back to order.

We do have a number of items as committee business to take care of - I'd actually like to start with correspondence. The correspondence that has been received since our last meeting has been sent electronically to all our members, but I believe you have written copies so each of you should have packages in front of you if you want to take a moment to just take a look.

We received correspondence from Ms. Mancini, Minister Joanne Bernard, and Stella Lord; correspondence regarding a motion made during our April 5th meeting; correspondence regarding the article written by Mr. Kendall Worth, who was a former presenter; and correspondence from the Benefits Reform Action Group. As I said, I believe all this was sent electronically prior to this meetings, so I'm asking for the committee's approval to post the response on our website.

Do I have a motion for that? Would all those in favour of the motion please say Aye. Contrary minded, Nay.

[The motion is carried.]

MADAM CHAIRMAN: I want to talk, too, about our committee meeting time. At the last meeting we had a suggestion of possibly changing our meeting times from 1:00 p.m. to 3:00 p.m., to 10:00 a.m. to 12:00 noon. It would still be the first Tuesday of the month and I do believe that this committee room is available from 10:00 a.m. to 12:00 noon on that day. Is there any discussion?

We have two of our regular members missing from this meeting today - has anybody had an opportunity to discuss this? It would be the first Tuesday of every month.

Then, instead of meeting from 1:00 p.m. to 3:00 p.m., it would be from 10:00 a.m. to 12:00 noon. Mr. Orrell.

MR. ORRELL: So that would be the first Tuesday, which we didn't do last week because of the holiday?

MADAM CHAIRMAN: That's correct.

MR. ORRELL: So that wouldn't conflict with any other committee members' meetings . . .

MADAM CHAIRMAN: No. There's no conflicts.

MR. ORRELL: . . . because Veterans Affairs is this afternoon.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: That's correct. This committee room is free the first Tuesday of every month, from 10:00 a.m. until 12:00 noon, which is why it was one of the suggestions. Ms. Eyking.

MS. EYKING: Coming from Cape Breton it would be better if we could leave Tuesday morning and get here for an afternoon meeting than come up Monday - it's an extra night in the city. For me - certainly that's just me - Tuesday afternoon would be more convenient but it's up to . . .

MADAM CHAIRMAN: And this is really just a preference for everybody, there's nothing set in stone. We had a member at the last meeting bring up the possibility of discussing whether we could change our meeting times from 1:00 p.m. to 3:00 p.m., instead to 10:00 a.m. to 12:00 noon.

MS. TREEN: So what we're trying to say is let's have the meeting 10:00 a.m. to 12:00 noon . . .

MADAM CHAIRMAN: That's correct.

MS. TREEN: I always thought it was. I thought it just always kept being switched to the afternoon.

I prefer the morning, it doesn't mess up my day of getting work done. I'm not from out of town but even coming over across the bridge I just kind of drop my kid off, keep going, get my work done, and get back. So I don't know if out-of-town members have . . .

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Right, so I'm guessing that we're kind of split between what is more convenient for our out-of-town members coming in and our in-town members. Maybe we will keep our Tuesday, October 4th meeting as is, the 1:00 p.m. to

3:00 p.m. time, which is our regular committee time. If I could ask committee members, especially those who are substituting, to go back to their caucuses and discuss.

One of our other items is we don't typically meet during the House session so our November meeting will fall during the House session. That will give us a little bit of time to come back in the new year and find out what the best move would be for this committee.

Is that okay if we defer this and I ask that you take it to your caucuses and take it to your committee members, and come to a consensus amongst each other of what would be a good time for a meeting?

MS. TREEN: I'm just confused because every time it came in from the Committees Office it was 10:00 a.m. to 12:00 noon and then we'd get an email . . .

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Our meetings for Community Services have always been from 1:00 p.m. to 3:00 p.m. This is the first time that we have ever had a 10:00 a.m. to 12:00 noon meeting for Community Services.

MR. ORRELL: The reason being because we had Veterans Affairs this afternoon. Last Tuesday was supposed to be a meeting, so we moved it to this Tuesday because of the holiday and people wouldn't have to travel on the holiday because Veterans Affairs wanted to be moved from 10:00 a.m. to 12:00 noon.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Mr. Orrell is correct. The only reason that today's meeting was not from 1:00 p.m. to 3:00 p.m. like it normally is, is because the Veterans Affairs Committee was already booked for that time. Anyway, we'll just put it aside and have a chat and come back.

MS. TREEN: If it's easier for out-of-town members it's fine, I don't care. I'm just talking about myself. That's the only person I can really talk about.

MR. ORRELL: It's two days for me anyway, if I come up Monday night or Tuesday morning, I'm going to stay until Wednesday because of caucus.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: We'll keep the October 4th meeting as set and we'll keep that from 1:00 p.m. until 3:00 p.m., and we can further discuss this. We want to make sure that all of our members are accommodated and are here comfortably.

So our next meeting is going to be October 4th. We have the Community Homes Action Group scheduled for that date. We do have agenda setting, which I believe was on the agenda for today. Does everybody have the list of suggested witnesses from each caucus? These are put forward by each of the caucuses. If there are any issues we can discuss them now.

This is a new agenda and we now have a clean slate, per se, of which order these witnesses come in. I suggest that we go back to our previous way and we take one from each as they are available - so skipping around. For the purposes of the next three or four meetings, which Mrs. Henry will try to schedule after our October 4th meeting, is it the will of the committee that the first group listed on the lists from each caucus be the first group approached by Mrs. Henry to see if they're available to speak? Are there any issues with that? Ms. Treen.

MS. TREEN: Are we picking?

MADAM CHAIRMAN: We are picking and my suggestion was that the first witness listed at each caucus be the first witness that Mrs. Henry try to approach. So for the Liberal caucus, it would be the Mi'kmaq child welfare specialist. Do you have a preference or does the Liberal caucus have a preference?

MS. TREEN: The third one is what I would suggest. I would really like to hear back about that report.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Is that the will of the Liberal caucus to have that witness be the first? So, Mrs. Henry, for the Liberal caucus we'll try to schedule the Sexual Violence Strategy Progress Report.

For the Progressive Conservative caucus, Mr. Orrell, you said the Department of Community Services staff: rules around working and education for income assistance recipients.

Ms. Mancini, do you have a preference other than the first?

MS. MANCINI: The first.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: So food bank usage in Nova Scotia, with the suggested witness of Feed Nova Scotia. So these will be the next three after our October 4th meeting.

There was a suggestion at our last meeting by the Liberal caucus that the Department of Community Services come and present to us on a number of topics that were covered and have an update on the special needs programs. This is why you have the right-hand person who kind of reminds you of these things. I would ask the committee if it would be possible for us to prioritize that to see when they are able to come in and possibly get them to be our first witness for the new year. Is that the will of the committee?

MR. ORRELL: So the Liberal caucus is going to do the Community Services update, is that what you're saying? And then it will go to us, and then you guys again? Okay, that's fine.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Okay. Well, there's nothing further. With that, we are adjourned. Have a great day.

[The committee adjourned at 11:50 a.m.]