

# **HANSARD**

**NOVA SCOTIA HOUSE OF ASSEMBLY**

**STANDING COMMITTEE**

**ON**

**COMMUNITY SERVICES**

**Tuesday, November 5, 2019**

**Committee Room**

**Poverty Reduction Grants**

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## **COMMUNITY SERVICES COMMITTEE**

Keith Irving, Chair  
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In Attendance:

Kim Leadley  
Acting Legislative Committee Clerk

Gordon Hebb  
Chief Legislative Counsel

## **WITNESSES**

### Department of Community Services

Joy Knight, Acting Executive Director, ESIA  
Bonnie Ste-Croix, Executive Lead on Poverty Reduction

### Department of Communities, Culture and Heritage

Natasha Jackson, Director, Communities Nova Scotia



**House of Assembly**  
*Nova Scotia*

**HALIFAX, TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 5, 2019**

**STANDING COMMITTEE ON COMMUNITY SERVICES**

**10:00 A.M.**

**CHAIR**  
Keith Irving

THE CHAIR: Order, please. I would like to call the Standing Committee on Community Services meeting to order. Welcome, everyone, this morning. My name is Keith Irving. I'm the Chair of this committee. Today, we will be receiving a presentation from the Department of Community Services and the Department of Communities, Culture and Heritage with respect to poverty reduction grants.

I would like to begin by asking my colleagues at the table to introduce themselves.

[The committee members introduced themselves.]

THE CHAIR: Just a reminder that washrooms and coffee are out in the anteroom and to the left. If there's an emergency, we'll exit through the Granville Street entrance and proceed to Grand Parade by St. Paul's Church. A reminder to put our phones on vibrate and also a reminder that only accredited media are permitted under House Rules to take pictures of the proceedings.

As well, just in terms of the back and forth, we'll receive a presentation and questions. Please wait to be acknowledged by the Chair. That allows Hansard to capture the proceedings.

With that, I would like to ask our guests here today to introduce themselves and provide their presentation. Ms. Knight.

JOY KNIGHT: Good morning. I'm happy to be here. My name is Joy Knight. I'm the Acting Executive Director of the Employment Support and Income Assistance program at the Department of Community Services.

NATASHA JACKSON: Natasha Jackson. I'm the Director of Communities Nova Scotia, with the Department of Communities, Culture and Heritage.

BONNIE STE-CROIX: Good morning, everyone. My name is Bonnie Ste-Croix. I'm the Executive Lead on Poverty Reduction.

THE CHAIR: Proceed, Ms. Knight.

JOY KNIGHT: Thank you. I'm really happy to be here today to talk to you about the Building Vibrant Communities grants and the poverty reduction blueprint. My colleagues are here with me today because we work very closely together on this work. We're really excited to tell you about the work that has been under way over the last couple of years.

I wanted to start today by positioning the poverty work that's happening across government for you a little more broadly, and then we'll speak in more detail about the grants. I'll speak very specifically to Community Services but touch on the work that's happening across government. As you are aware, we are in the midst of a transformation in the department. All three programs are undergoing a significant transformation in the way that we work with our clients so that we offer better services to the people that we serve.

I wanted to mention that all of that work that we do is very deeply rooted in what clients have told us needs to change within our system. This is really what guides us in the work that we do every day. We've been out on the road and have had 19 focus group sessions around the province. We have had surveys from over 1,700 participants. We have been on the road every year since 2016 hearing first voice from people living in poverty, around what their challenges and their experiences are. That's informing our work moving forward.

We've heard from them that our financial supports need to be improved, that accessing our services has to be easier and more consistent for them. We know that transportation is a significant challenge - not just in rural areas, but in urban. We know that we have to have a better relationship so that we are providing the supports and services that

clients need to move forward in their lives. We know that our young people need better supports. They've told us, you need to do more to help our young people. Lastly - not listed here - we want the opportunity to try work without penalty.

Those have been that first voice feedback, that narrative from people who are living in poverty is really what's driving the work that we've done to date. As part of that work - we hear first voice to figure out the work that we need to do going ahead, but of course we have to hold ourselves accountable in the work that we're doing. In order to hold ourselves accountable and to be able to report on and measure the impact that we're having, we have set our departmental client and system outcomes.

You can see there five client outcomes that were focused on, informed by what clients have asked of us. They need to have control over their own lives; they have to be able to meet their basic needs; feel safe from abuse and violence; they need to be included in their community; and they need to be attached to the labour market. Really happy to share some examples with you today of how the Building Vibrant Communities grants are helping us to achieve these client-focused outcomes.

There are quite a few major initiatives that have taken place over the last number of years that are moving forward in the province and that are helping people to build income security. I'm going to highlight a few for you, but I'm happy to speak further to them in the question period.

We have doubled the poverty reduction credit from \$250 to \$500. That really gets at our most vulnerable citizens. We have exempted child maintenance, giving about 1,600 clients an average of \$275 more each month. We have introduced the personal items allowance for individuals that are experiencing homelessness or living in transition houses at \$101 a month to help them with personal items, personal hygiene effects.

We introduced the wage exemption structure last year. It is the most progressive in the country and it is allowing more people to work and earn more money than ever before. We are seeing significant outcomes with this new policy change. We're really excited about what it means for people being able to improve their inadequacy.

In January 2020, we will be introducing, as you are aware, the standard household rate, which is the largest increase to IA in the history of the program.

All of these pieces come together to be the largest wholesale change in social services in the province in the last 50 years. It's a package. It all comes together to improve adequacy. We know it's not just one item that's going to alleviate poverty and move people forward - it takes a whole suite of services. This is just the beginning of the work we need to do.

We're going to speak a bit about how we need to work across all of the departments and horizontally in order to address an issue as complex as poverty, and particularly with

income assistance clients - our program alone cannot resolve some of the barriers they are facing. So our work is very deeply complemented by what's happening in other departments, such as increasing the basic personal amount and increases to minimum wage.

We also need to remove barriers that are in the system. There are several facing people in poverty - again, that's why we need that holistic approach across government. I'll highlight a few here. We talk about removing the systemic cultural and representation barriers that exist for people living in poverty when we talk about more than just a rate increase. We've made some significant changes that are helping people.

We introduced the HRM bus pass pilot, which has really led to some incredible outcomes. We've heard from many people that are able to get out into community. We heard from a group of clients that are facing mental health issues who have been able to go out to the airport to watch the planes fly in. They find that social inclusion activity extremely helpful for their well-being. That's a wonderful initiative. I'm looking forward to evaluating that pilot by the end of this year.

We also know that the way we work with our clients, the conversations we have with them, the way we case manage with them and build their plans with them is absolutely one of the most critical pieces of work we need to do. We need to meet people where they are, understand what their challenges are and how we can help to move them forward. Our new case management approach that we will be working on over the next couple of years is looking to address that. It's about empowering our case workers to have the tools and skills required to move our clients forward and creating the right suite of programs and services that clients need to access to move forward with their lives.

Lastly, as we talk about working across government, we also have to work collaboratively within our own department. Within DCS, we often share the same client or the same family across all three programs and too often in the past we've had our services at the centre of how we operate and our client on the periphery, trying to access independently all three of our programs. We're changing the way that we work. Child Welfare Services, Disability Support Program, and ESIA are looking to integrate and align our services to put the client back at the focus of what we do.

As I mentioned previously, this is about working across government, so some of the key barriers that we often see in income assistance are child care-related and transportation-related. The recent changes that have happened across government that are having a very positive impact are the new child subsidies that were announced, the expansion of pre-Primary, the expansion of the breakfast programs - all of these are having very positive impacts on our ESIA clients and families living in poverty.

Before I turn it over to my colleague to speak more about the blueprint, I wanted to touch on a really critical pillar of our poverty work. It is also a pillar of the poverty blueprint and it's a key focus for ESIA and DCS under transformation because we recognized that young people were becoming too large a proportion of our caseload. Too many young

people were coming to our door as their only option and not seeing that they had a different pathway outside of poverty.

We have, in the last couple of years, introduced a series of new preventive programming for youth at risk, particularly targeting dependence of ESIA and DSP clients and youth in care. I've listed them here and I won't go into details but if there are questions, I'll be more than happy to answer them. I'm just going to highlight one program that you may not be aware of: Inspiring Success, the first one under our ESIA youth programming.

What we are looking to build is a continuum of programming. We want to get to people younger. We want to give them hope and confidence; connection to community at a young age; give them work experience; understand what career exploration is; start to define their career goal; and ultimately through our programming, support them in post-secondary and to transition into independence, completely independent of income support.

Doing that, these programs build on each other, but I wanted to highlight Inspiring Success because oftentimes we are turning to community and we are saying, can you do more, or private sector, can you do more? Can you step up and help our young people? Inspiring Success is a great example of government doing that. It is a program that takes high school-aged youth that are attached to income assistance or DCS in some way - either through their families or as youth in care - and are post-secondary students that are sponsored through our ESIA program to go to community college or university, to get government work experience for the summer that is related to their field of study or to their potential career interest areas.

This has been very inspiring for us here in ESIA to see government rally around the people that are in our department and recognize that it isn't just the responsibility of the Department of Community Services to step up and do things for people who are living in poverty - it is the responsibility of all of government. We had 50 young people this year that participated in the program, and a 100 per cent completion rate. We've had three permanent hires so far to the program - it's in its second year - and 14 departments and agencies have stepped up to hire young people. We are now getting calls year-round asking, do you have somebody for me, I have the most success with hiring your students.

I'm just thrilled to share that good news story with you today. I'd now like to pass it over to my colleague Bonnie, to tell us a little bit more about the blueprint.

THE CHAIR: Ms. Ste-Croix.

BONNIE STE-CROIX: Thank you, everyone. I am excited to have this opportunity to talk to you about this work. Of course, it's what I come to work every day to do, so I'm excited to share it.

This is our third year of the poverty reduction blueprint. We've taken an innovative approach with the poverty reduction blueprint. We are using three streams of funding and

investing in communities with those streams of funding and evaluating all the projects that we're doing. It's a \$20 million multi-year investment, and we're currently in year three.

[10:15 a.m.]

Everything we gain from this will be grounded in evidence gleaned from dozens of action-oriented projects. Funded projects from across the province are delivered via innovative collaborative efforts by multiple sectors. The benefit of this is Nova Scotians reap immediate benefits from the innovative poverty reduction projects that are taking place in their communities. As initiatives are evaluated, they yield Nova Scotia-based evidence that's then used to inform the poverty reduction work for subsequent years. Every year of work informs the next. This iterative approach ensures that learnings are incorporated and that we're methodically revealing characteristics and approaches that lead to the most positive outcomes.

These cumulative learnings are the foundation for the resulting blueprint. To be clear, there is no blueprint yet. We're in the process of building the blueprint, and this is the way in which we're going about doing that.

As I mentioned, there are three streams of funding. The one we're here to talk chiefly about today is the Building Vibrant Communities grants. For those of you who don't know, I come from community. This month marks my second year with government, but I was formerly executive director of a non-profit in Spryfield. This is very close to my heart because we fund non-profit agencies as well as municipalities and post-secondaries.

It is an investment in community-led expertise. We're giving community the opportunities to test their own ideas in their own communities. The strategic government projects are typically initiatives that are led by one government department, often involving multiple departments, as well as community-based partners.

We're also doing social innovation labs. This is a comprehensive stakeholder inclusion in solution development for complex poverty priorities.

Community engagement is key to all of these streams, as you've seen, it kind of permeates all three streams. We are increasing the depth and breadth of collaborative practice across the province because there is a huge focus on collaboration and bringing together multiple sectors. It ensures that the voice of the community is embedded into all aspects of the poverty reduction work. It is also providing government with deeper insights into what's important in community.

With every application that comes into us from community, we are learning. There is so much rich information in there about what a community feels is important to them and what assets they have to put to that and to help work with those issues. Government is acquiring a very strong sense of community assets and the type of expertise they possess, as well as what they feel is most important in their communities.



While we're here today to speak chiefly about the Building Vibrant Communities grant, I wanted to just take a moment to briefly touch on one example of a government project and one example of a social innovation lab. I will keep it very high level, because otherwise, I will definitely speak too long because I'm very excited about some of this work.

One of the strategic government projects is one where Housing partnered with Adsum. They work together to develop streamlined services for families in crisis due to impending homelessness. It's called Diverting Families from Shelter to Home. That meant sitting down with each family and having the capacity to find out what was needed for their unique circumstances: what would help those families that were facing homelessness, and how could that be addressed on a family-by-family basis?

They have had great success in the first seven months; 13 families were provided with stable housing, which included 14 adults and 26 children, and eight families that were at immediate risk of homelessness were provided with housing without even one stay in emergency shelter.

I'm sure most of you are aware that if a child experiences a homeless shelter, the likelihood of them being homeless as an adult increases dramatically, so the more that we can avoid having children ever experience that, the better. This really focused on that and has really done some fabulous work, so we're very excited about that project.

A quick example - again, if there are questions about it, I can always speak to it more later - we did a social innovation lab. It was the African Nova Scotian Youth Employment Lab. We've had such amazing leadership from the community for this project. It has been very exciting.

We've had two groups come together from community and partner with each other so that they could benefit from each other's skills in terms of facilitation and in terms of reaching out into community, and that was Common Good Solutions and One North End. The purpose of the lab is to learn more about what perpetuates disproportionately high rates of unemployment among African Nova Scotian youth from ages 18 to 35, in particular, work to co-design ideas that might improve the situation. Just as a quick sample, they had 117 African Nova Scotian youth contribute to this process. It has been a really phenomenal experience and again, I can speak more to you about the ideas that came from that if you have questions later.

In the meantime, I'd like to touch on evaluation. We're very excited, and evaluation is not something everybody usually gets excited about, but it is pretty exciting with the approach that we're taking. We're doing a hybrid approach, so developmental evaluation processes along with some formative and summative. We are bringing communities together through the evaluation process.

For all the projects that are happening, we're bringing together project leads, participants, and partners, and we're trying to cluster them by region so that we're also building connections in the region. They are having facilitated dialogue with an evaluator so that we can really dig deep down and get into that information. Learnings, of course, will inform subsequent years and the poverty reduction blueprint itself.

The next slide is a map, and all those dots are the projects that have either been completed or are under way. This is within our first two years. As you know, we're in year three and we are launching more projects now, but in the first two years we had 136 projects, some of which are still under way and some of those have already been completed. As you can see, they've been spread across the province and we've had interest from every corner of the province, truly.

Many of the dots also represent regional - that's not necessarily evident from the dot itself, but it's hard to portray that - and some of them are also province-wide projects. Each and every one, as I've said before, is being evaluated; every one of these projects is being evaluated.

As we proceed into year three, our focus is on children and families and applying what we've learned and growing it. We want to grow successful existing initiatives within government. I know that we're working with some of Joy's staff to do some of that work; for example, testing out what would happen if we were to extend some of the income assistance programs to people who are working and who are not income assistance clients, but could benefit from those same programs.

We're also increasing the focus on children and families. In fact, 50 per cent of all poverty reduction funding for projects is going towards children and families who are living on lower income this year. We're also looking at scaling, so the projects that are showing some really good findings from the evaluations, we're now going to look at trying it out in another community. Is there another community that could reap benefits from this? Do they experience the same issues? That's a big focus for us this year, as well.

Some of you may or may not know that our call for grants closed yesterday, so we have a big stack of grants to go through. We will be setting up meetings to evaluate those and to provide more funding and start some new projects in the upcoming weeks. If you'd like to look at any details on the Building Vibrant Communities grant process or the application, that's on the CCH website and you can find that there.

Just before I hand it over to my colleague, I wanted to give you a little bit of a deeper intro into the Building Vibrant Communities grant. Essentially, we know that communities know their own priorities better than anyone else. It was essential that a significant portion of the poverty reduction blueprint work would be driven by community and for community.

The BVC program is doing a big portion of this. It provides community-based entities with an opportunity to try out their own poverty reduction ideas on the ground. It offers a unique way for community and government to learn what works for poverty reduction in Nova Scotia. It builds community capacity to further address poverty, as well as to evaluate their own efforts. It provides results that can be used to inform policy, which of course it will, and it provides government with clear information on issues that are close to the community's hearts.

It does this by contributing towards learnings that will build the blueprint out itself and the program does it by strengthening, aligning with, and leveraging community expertise; supporting collaborative ideas; really examining the submissions, as I mentioned earlier, and evaluation reports and final reports so that we can really more deeply understand what community priorities are; and engaging communities in developmental evaluation processes for further knowledge about, and capacity for, evaluation. That's something that we noted was an area that the community said they wanted to know more about, which is why we're engaging them so heavily in this process.

I will tie that up now and pass it over to my colleague Natasha, to give you some examples of these projects.

THE CHAIR: Ms. Jackson.

NATASHA JACKSON: I am actually very excited, but I know I'm the last one here so I can't talk too much about the 136 projects, but I'm hoping that I can take the next few minutes to highlight for you eight of the Building Vibrant Community grants that have been undertaken by community members over the last couple of years.

I'll start out by reiterating what Bonnie shared with us - that the Building Vibrant Community grants were set up to support community projects that were designed to address poverty - in their words and with their contributions. In other words, supporting collaborative initiatives. So, one of the key pieces of the Building Vibrant Community grants is the evaluation process calls upon community members to come together and solve the issues and address the barriers collectively.

Also through that exercise, it's providing communities the opportunity to build their capacity to resolve their own issues, that's a key component. When you offer an opportunity for people to actually exercise their own will and contribute to their own well-being, the results are marvelous. I think that the snapshots that we have here today will show that.

Finally, I'll add that - as Bonnie said - the call for applications for year three ended at 11:59 p.m. last evening. At last count, we have more than 75 applications that have been received, and we anticipate a number more because the demand for doing this work is quite heavy.

The first one that I'd like to highlight for you is the Whitney Pier Boys and Girls Club. The group came together with Cape Breton-Victoria Regional Centre for Education, the Kiwanis Club, and Cape Breton Health and Recreation. The grant of \$20,000 was pretty much able to do - I sometimes think the impossible - with a \$20,000 investment over seven months. In that seven months, they were able to engage 180 youth for seven months, providing them with workshops and opportunities to strengthen their resilience and improve their mental and physical well-being.

During that time, transportation as we all know, is a barrier for many. The grant allowed the group to offer accessible transportation for participants, as well as addressing their food insecurity needs.

The next project is a smaller grant of \$5,000 for La Coopérative De Transport De Chéticamp Limitée committee. They called the project L'Acabie. L'Acabie was providing affordable fares for seniors, persons with disabilities and special needs, as well as anyone who really needed to access affordable transportation.

Transportation was provided within northern Inverness County and people were able to access the services for appointments in Inverness going to Baddeck, Sydney, Port Hawkesbury, Antigonish and sometimes Halifax.

More than 25 community members participated in the program and the affordable fares provided the participants the opportunity to build their self esteem and, most importantly, their independence. Oftentimes, the ability to get to where they needed to go to solve their personal issues was not being met. The affordable fares provided that.

[10:30 a.m.]

Next is the Mi'kmaw Native Friendship Centre here in Halifax. The project that they embarked on was called Gina'masuti. It was a \$50,000 investment. What's unique about this one is that it engaged two additional staff members to the Mi'kmaw Native Friendship Centre team but engaged with support workers, post-secondary education advisers, employment officers, as well as legal support staff. It provided outreach to Indigenous youth living in Halifax or those transitioning from rural areas into Halifax centre.

The youth were provided with unique employment assistance as well as resource workshops. Those workshops varied and were dependent upon what the needs of the youth were. One of the larger pieces that came out of this was the ability to access mainstream services. The project was able to bridge and support the transition of the youth to take advantage of supports that they needed to be successful. There were 100 participants over the nine months of the project.

Next is a very unique project with a small investment of \$3,000 in the Amherst area at the regional high school, the Viking Pantry. This project was created with the Amherst

Youth Town Council as well as the folks in the school and the teachers. It offered the youth an opportunity to access nutritional food during the school day, but it also offered those youth that had the ability to share what they had. It was unique in that youth went into the centre, and nobody knew whether or not they were contributing to the food bank and the needs or taking the nutritional needs. It allowed that place for youth to come together and get rid of a lot of the stigma.

One of the programs that they ran out of that centre was teaching the youth how to prepare food economically. As a result, 16 families actually received turkey dinners at the end. With a small amount of money, a huge impact was provided to the community.

Next is the Shelburne County Youth Health and Support Association, with a \$5,000 investment. The project lead stated that often individuals, particularly youth, living in poverty feel a sense of isolation. This project was unique in that it allowed the support staff to go out into the schools and in the surrounding areas to meet with the youth where they were and build rapport so that they could then access and have the supports with them to address their individual needs. We have noted a couple of comments. One that captured us when we tried to do the final reports and assess the impact of the investments was that the youth enjoyed just having somebody around on a regular basis.

Tri County Women's Centre is another very unique project, a \$50,000 investment. It paired up youth with youth apprentices and a certified carpenter to provide small home repairs to 32 homeowners in Yarmouth. That included changing doorknobs, putting in new windows, putting in caulking around the windows, making places a little warmer in the Winter, installing fire alarms, and inserting ramps for accessibility. The purpose of the project was to make sure that people in low-income situations could actually stay in their homes. The labour costs were deferred through the project, but the homeowner was able to access affordable supplies. The youth were able to work with the apprentice as well as the carpenter to provide that to 32 homeowners.

Bonny Lea Farm had a very unique idea to allow the broader community and the participants of Bonny Lea to come together, so they created a play where the participants actually took part in the entire piece - from costume design to set construction and developing the play and actually acting in the play. Through that exercise, they were able to create an opportunity for participants at Bonny Lea to meet the broader community. They had two sold-out shows. They were very proud to say that they had received a spot on CBC about the innovative approach. All participants in the play were able to secure employment opportunities following the play.

Last but not least, is the Old School Community Gathering Place on the Eastern Shore. This project was about building the community's capacity to address and support one another, so it was a collective community initiative to bring together not-for-profit organizations that support mental health and addiction, addressing issues of isolation, and equipping people with information around financial literacy, cooking, and bereavement support. They came together and offered the service over five months to more than 100

residents who came out and participated. They felt less isolated, more engaged in their community, and it afforded that opportunity for community members to really support one another.

THE CHAIR: Ms. Knight.

JOY KNIGHT: Just to wrap things up, I wanted to reposition, as well, that the poverty reduction blueprint and the amazing work of the Building Vibrant Communities grant is a piece of the larger work that we know we have to undertake in order to address poverty in this province.

Just highlighting a few things here: it is an all-systems approach but is absolutely an all-government-hands-on-deck approach that is required. So I'm highlighting here for you some of the tables and some of the departments we're currently working with, particularly through the Department of Community Services.

Obviously, building towards the blueprint work continues. I am working very actively across departments and transportation-related issues impacting clients and impacting individuals living in poverty. It's absolutely a key issue for me and something that I know needs to be addressed for people to be able to access labour market, and access services and supports they need to move forward.

I work very closely with the Department of Labour and Advanced Education. They are the employment and post-secondary department of government, but we also have employment and post-secondary programming in DCS. We want to make sure that we're aligned and equitable in our services and consistent in our delivery. We want to make sure that if you walk through a door for those services in this province, you are going to get the same high standard of service, no matter what.

I work very closely with the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development's SchoolsPlus on early identification of youth at risk and how we refer them into a continuum of programming that we're building so that we're not missing anyone. We're working closely with the Department of Justice and the NSCC on transitions for incarcerated youth, particularly focused on under-represented young people and how they are supported before they're released to engage in post-secondary studies and have a very different pathway in life.

Of course, we continue to work with key stakeholders on very important issues like food insecurity, access to child care, community inclusion, and a lot of learnings for the ESIA program coming out of the community work happening through the grants that we'll continue to leverage and build on.

I just wanted to let you know that we recognize a lot of work is still needed. We've had some great progress to date, but poverty is a long game and we are absolutely committed to the work that needs to be done. Thank you very much.

THE CHAIR: Thank you very much to all three of our witnesses here this morning. I'll now open it up to the floor for questions. I think we'll try and wrap questions up by 11:30 a.m. because we have an agenda setting and some business and correspondence to deal with. Ms. DiCostanzo.

RAFAH DICOSTANZO: It was a lovely presentation and I know there's a lot that is happening. I worked with a lot of the refugees and know exactly what's available and I was so impressed with all the assistance services that were there. Also, there were a few that needed change and I've heard about two since I've become an MLA that I was so excited about.

One of them is employment. I had a lot of refugees come to me and say, it's not worth for us to work because we make less in the long run and the income assistance is cut off. Then this thing that came up where after a certain amount, you can keep 75 per cent - I know the numbers. At the time, I was so excited about it. I was really happy that you brought that program.

I would love to know how much that has made a difference in the number of people who were on income assistance but are working and making use of that program that you brought in.

JOY KNIGHT: You're talking about the wage exemption policy that was recently brought in. We have seen phenomenal impacts and support of that, we have also built other programming that supports new immigrants and refugees to income assistance - understanding that they do come with different challenges and barriers. Some of them will come from refugee camps. Some of them actually have post-secondary but are unable to use their credentials here. There are a whole myriad of issues, as well as understanding Canadian culture and Canadian work culture. We work very closely with ISANS on that. We've developed two programs with them specific to supporting immigrant and refugee youth, and immigrant clients.

You're right about the wage exemption. It is the most progressive in the country and it's a significant change. It was \$150 - you could retain \$150 and 70 per cent of that was charged against your benefit after that \$150. We heard from clients loud and clear when we did our first voice consultations in 2016 around the province, that it's a disincentive to work. Stop calling it a wage incentive - it's actually a disincentive and you're actually penalizing us for trying work. So this change was made, and it is now that you can retain \$250 and then it is a graduated system and so 25 per cent is charged to a certain amount.

Instead of talking through those numbers, because it is a bit complex, I will be happy to share that grid with you so that you can see. It is a purposefully graduated system so that you are keeping more and more wages in your pocket. For some of our clients, it's hundreds of dollars a month more. It helps with their transition off income assistance, so

you're building more stability and earning more before you actually become ineligible for income assistance, so helping with that transition.

We're seeing wonderful impacts with the program and I'm glad you're hearing about them as well.

RAFAH DICOSTANZO: Do you have an evaluation or a number of clients who have taken up this and where are you - it has been one year or a little less. Do you know some statistics of how many people have found jobs and are still on income assistance and using both incomes?

JOY KNIGHT: Sorry, I didn't answer that the first time. We do track those numbers. As part of departmental outcomes - the client system that I mentioned in the presentation - we do have very specific measures that we report on every single month internally to make sure that we are seeing gains and can make improvements where needed.

We are seeing an increase to clients. More clients are participating in the labour market, so more are reporting wages - we are seeing that more clients are earning more wages. I don't have those numbers exactly here, but I will absolutely give them to the committee and follow up.

What's really exciting as well is, we're seeing a significant increase in participation in employment support services. Those numbers are increasing dramatically over the last year in a way we haven't seen in a number of years. We have heard from many people - clients and front-line staff - that it is because clients want to take advantage of the new policy. They see the value in that.

Another important part of our work is that previously the system was, you are with employment support services because it's a requirement of your eligibility. We don't want to be that program anymore. If you want to try work - if part-time work is the best that you can do or it works the best for your situation, we're supportive of that. Now we're seeing a lot more people with disabilities, previously excluded from our services, putting their hand up to say, I'd like some skills training too and I'd like you to support me to get work to the best of my ability. We're finding that really exciting.

That's a bit of a longer game as well. As those individuals come into employment support services and work on that employment action plan, education plan - whatever that is for them - it takes some time for them to realize the benefit of earning the wages, but we're definitely seeing really positive indications.

[10:45 a.m.]

THE CHAIR: Ms. Leblanc.



SUSAN LEBLANC: Thank you for your presentation. I just wanted to start by saying a couple of things based on your presentation, and then I'll ask a question.

I want to say first of all that I had the opportunity to have a little tour of the Dartmouth ESIA department a couple of weeks ago. It was really nice. We were going around to the cubicles where all the staff were and often there were these little things pasted on everyone's walls about this new attention to listening to the clients. I have to say that since I became an MLA - two and a half years now - I feel like in my office, there's actually a difference when people come in with issues connected to ESIA. There are fewer people saying, my worker doesn't listen to me, and more people just getting right to the point.

Anyway, I just wanted to say that I think maybe you've recognized through the consultations that that was an issue. It feels, at least on the ground, that maybe it's getting better. I just wanted to give you a shout-out for that.

The other thing, of course, is that the number one thing from the transformation consultations is that financial support should be improved. I know that there are some really great programs, but I'm going to say this because it's my job - when I hear with the standard household rate that the 2 per cent to 5 per cent increase is the biggest increase that has ever happened in DCS, that may be true but let us not forget that there has not been an increase for five or six years. So the people who are living on the lowest incomes in the province are still going to be living on the lowest incomes in the province. With rents skyrocketing the way they are, I feel like the incomes are still woefully inadequate.

With that, I want to ask a question. In our caucus we did a freedom of information request and we received this really informative map - material deprivation by community cluster. It's based on 2016 data so it's a little bit out of date now, but we know that material deprivation is based on unemployment rate, adults with less than high school education, and median individual income. There is a scale from one to five. I have copies for all my colleagues and I'll pass them around in a second.

If you look at the map, the darkest blue colours - the bottom three colours - are the highest material deprivation, which means people living in the worst situations, as it were. Around metro, it's a little better, but it's still not great.

My first question is, based on this - what it says basically is that the majority of the province is in the three to five range. I'm wondering, do you think that the poverty reduction grant program is an adequate response to this scale of income equality in Nova Scotia?

JOY KNIGHT: Thank you for sharing the positive experiences you're having with our local office. It's really wonderful to hear and I'm really glad to see that's getting to the clients. We have heard, if you could do anything, please let's have a more respectful relationship, so I'm really pleased to hear that's resonating. That is absolutely the focus of our transformation.

On your question around, do I believe that the Building Vibrant Communities grants are adequate for the issues that you've just articulated, the Building Vibrant Community grants are only a piece of what we need to do. I absolutely recognize that.

One of the greatest privileges of my job and one of the greatest challenges is hearing first voice all the time, which I know you do in your role as well. It has to guide our work and it has to continually inform. In meeting with those people, as I do quite regularly, I am aware that there are still people struggling and they are still facing challenges, and the work that we have done has not resolved those challenges yet.

A lot has happened to date, and I can speak about the clients that have told us that their lives are better, but I can also of course speak to the clients who transformation hasn't yet impacted them, and there is more work to be done. We're absolutely committed to that.

We know that the grants are an excellent piece of that because I know in our program alone, we cannot impact that map in the way it needs to be impacted. We need to be thinking holistically and we really need the expertise of community, and we need to really dig into the assets and the experience that they bring to these issues. We're really excited about the learnings that have come out of the grants and the opportunities to move forward and to make a much better difference to that map and those colours.

SUSAN LEBLANC: I'm wondering if the department used the map and the indicators of income, education, and unemployment in deciding where to fund projects, or if there is money targeted to certain regions and that kind of thing?

JOY KNIGHT: Excellent question. I will ask Bonnie to speak specifically to that, but I do want to say that we are very fortunate to have a map guy in our department who for a lot of our work - specific to DCS of course, and understanding that people in poverty are not all attached to our system, often for a lot of our program development - he looks at where clients are located around the province, where the pockets are, what the demographics look like, the age ranges, the family composition in order to best understand where we need to be making our investments, where we might need to pivot or adjust what we're doing. So we are absolutely using that sort of technology across the board. I'll ask Bonnie to speak specifically to the blueprint.

BONNIE STE-CROIX: Because we have a map guy - you can't imagine coming from the non-profit sector when I came and I was like, we have a map guy? (Laughter) That was very exciting, so we were able to translate the Statistics Canada information, the income information. We do use all three measures - we use LICO, we use LIM - but we do lean a lot on MBM or market basket measure for poverty, so the maps were done based on the market basket measure.

We were able to do it by county, so for each county we would have the levels of poverty. We use these maps - we cross-reference them. We have depth of poverty and prevalence of poverty. When you cross-reference those two, you get a deeper look at what

is in existence. If you look just at prevalence, you may see an area that looks like there's not much poverty there because it's not showing much prevalence, but when you look at depth, you see that the poverty that is there is very deep. So it gives you a bit more texture to what you're looking at.

We have aimed to ensure those communities are included in our work. When we are doing projects - in particular BVC grants - it does require that there is a group or an entity on the ground in the community that is wanting to participate in this. That of course must be the case, and so if there was no group that wanted to participate, we couldn't offer a BVC grant.

We also do have a scoring criteria and there is a panel of folks who do the evaluation of the applications as they come in. The other map that I had up earlier with the dots across the province were always including the lens of populations that are most impacted: African Nova Scotians, Indigenous populations, immigrant populations, people with disabilities. Those are front of mind, as well as the geographic dispersion.

It wasn't that map specifically, but I do believe that what we've been able to achieve here has been to provide a new lens on this for us and we made better decisions because of it. Natasha, did you want to add something to that as well?

NATASHA JACKSON: Thanks for asking that question because I think the Building Vibrant Communities grants in particular, one of the unique aspects has been the collaboration across departments. As Joy had mentioned, there are specific communities and community members that may be attached to the Department of Community Services, but there are other departments that actually have other communities and other areas that DCS may not have engagement with.

One of the reasons why the Building Vibrant Communities grants were actually passed on and administered by the Department of Communities, Culture and Heritage is because we actually reach into those non-traditional communities with different kinds of groups. I would say that Bonny Lea would be a good example. People may not be looking at that area or that community as needing assistance, but we went to a group that was putting on an arts activity that has actually led to employment.

THE CHAIR: Mr. Craig.

STEVE CRAIG: Ms. Jackson, Ms. Knight, Ms. Ste-Croix, thank you very much for being here today. It's always nice to see people who are actually working on poverty reduction in this province, especially in the government sector because there are so many needs out there, and it is such a complex problem. I know it's a challenge for us all.

Ms. Knight, you started off giving the umbrella view, and I would like to start there, and in my supplementary, I'll go someplace else. In my vast experience of three and a half months as an MLA and then 64 years of being on this Earth, it's one of those things where

I often look to the overall strategy and what that overall strategy is. I noted that in 2009, there was an overall strategy put forward by a previous Progressive Conservative Government, and then it seems to have fallen off the rails. I have talked to former ministers, Ms. Bernard, and I have talked with Ms. Peterson-Rafuse as well. There's some concern expressed about where that transformation plan is and what it looks like.

I do thank you, Ms. Knight, for the orientation that MLA Leblanc and I attended some time ago before the start of the last session. I think I asked, where is the transformation strategy? Where is this big overarching document that leads into individual departments, individual sections, within the government to help them do this? I did ask for it, but I haven't received it yet. I'm assuming that there's this overarching transformation document because everybody says we're at a certain stage in transformation, we're getting there, and we're still working on it. I have not seen the actual document. Is it possible to get a copy of that document?

JOY KNIGHT: Transformation for us - I am aware of the 2009 strategy document as well. Our transformation is taking a different approach. It is not about trying to craft in one moment in time what we should do to address poverty. It's about having a starting point, which we all need, of course, and understanding we spent years in research and understanding the issue of poverty and looking at other jurisdictions and best practices and what information we need to inform us to start moving. We're absolutely in the action phase now of it.

It's about being iterative; let's take our learnings over the last couple of years. We're doing a lot of testing of models even outside of the grants, which is a wonderful opportunity to test how we really impact poverty. We're doing it in the Employment Support and Income Assistance program as well. We're piloting youth programs like EDGE, which is a program just for youth attached to income assistance, to move them in a different kind of way off of the system. We want to be able to test models instead of committing to something before we know if it will work. A strategy document doesn't exist for transformation in that way. It is an iterative process. We absolutely have milestones and commitments. The blueprint will be a piece of that, a big informing piece that will direct us.

I can speak to what we have committed to as the pillars of transformation and the work under that. If I just take one quick example, we are committed to the ESIA case management approach that I talked about. That's very broad. That's talking about how we properly assess need, how we have proper training and competency for staff to deliver in case management, and what the entire suite of services are that we need to deliver on to move people towards labour market attachment and/or community inclusion. Defining what that is means that we're not bringing community and first voice to the table to inform each part of the process. For that reason, we are moving in a much more iterative way.

STEVE CRAIG: I now want to move to the poverty reduction Building Vibrant Communities grants and that area. I will note that 136 projects have been funded to date.

You're in the final year of this and it's being used almost like we're building the plane and flying it at the same time.

I appreciate that and it's really nice to see, too, that there's a title called an Executive Lead on Poverty Reduction. That is neat and I'd like to talk to you more about that. When I retired in 2004, I was the business process owner for what's now Bell Aliant's business sales processes, so I can imagine what your role is. It's not just confined to community services.

In the third year, I note that 50 per cent of the funds are pretty well committed to existing ones, so that only leaves 50 per cent for new projects. In my community, over the last year or two, we've identified homelessness as a key issue in our area. However, we're not able to build a shelter and we have people who are looking for emergency warmth at night or during the day.

Halifax Metro Vineyard Christian Fellowship has established a warming centre and they need help. They have applied and they made that deadline of 11:59 last night, so they have done that. There's a collaborative effort between them, the Sackville Area Warming Centre as well as the Navigator Program that you might be aware of and so on, but they do need assistance. They started with nothing. They have money, and then they absolutely have the need; they've identified the need.

Would you explain to me a little bit about that decision-making process as to, are you looking for something totally new? We're not talking about a shelter. I notice some of the comments in here talk about shelter and emergency shelter, but this is for the people who don't have emergency shelter access. These are for the people who are sleeping in a park, in a dumpster, have no place to go other than perhaps a Tim Hortons or a kiosk in a bank building or somewhere to stay warm at night and do not have access to a shelter because there is no shelter in my community.

JOY KNIGHT: Homelessness is absolutely a key focus for us as well, from an income assistance perspective. I'll let Bonnie speak to the process.

As you're aware, probably homelessness is now under the Department of Municipal Affairs and Housing. I want to assure people that while that responsibility and that programming left the income assistance program, we work hand in hand on that issue because those are our clients. We're really excited about the almost-\$400 million invested in the new Housing Strategy and what that means for how we do better on homelessness in this province.

The previous executive director for Employment Support and Income Assistance is now over at Housing leading that work, so I have a lot of faith that he's leading that work knowing the clients that need their help and with a real deep appreciation of that work needing to move forward.

Bonnie can speak specifically to our process and how we evaluate each of the applications.

THE CHAIR: Ms. Ste-Croix.

BONNIE STE-CROIX: Thank you for your question. Homelessness is a significant issue. Housing was one of the seven themes that we have for poverty reduction work and we have had quite a few projects that have happened around housing.

The one thing I would say is - and please correct me if I'm wrong in this - but you had said approximately 50 per cent is committed to existing projects. I think what you're talking about is that we're going to be reinvesting in ones that are working really well. What I would say to that is that that means that those projects, which may have housing projects within those, will benefit other communities - not just the community they originally happened in.

I just wanted to remind you that your community also may benefit from the ones that are being reinvested in. The idea behind that is that for the ones that are providing evidence of improved outcomes, through evaluation, we want to reinvest in those. We want to continue them where they started, but we also want to try them out in other communities that experience like issues.

If a housing project took place in one community and they have had particularly solid outcomes and good evidence, we would like to then try that in other communities. I just wanted to say that it doesn't mean that it won't happen in your community because the idea here is that we would be spreading them around and eventually growing them to meet the needs of communities. Hopefully that helps assuage that a little bit.

In terms of the projects themselves, they don't have to be a completely new idea that's never been done before. We do ask for innovation; sometimes innovation comes by way of the type of partnerships that are being developed. It might be that maybe a business is going to be involved in helping. We've had some of those things and we're definitely trying to encourage that. We would love to see some really creative partnerships come together, as well.

There are criteria and we certainly could provide more information on that as a follow-up to this, if that would be helpful as well. The guidelines that are found on the CCH website do provide you with a fairly good look at the key things we're looking for, but we're always happy to talk more about that and happy to talk to people who are applying, as well.

I know that our colleagues at CCH often spend time speaking to people before they apply to help them ensure that their applications are coming in, so I'm hoping perhaps that happened with the group you're referencing, as well. We certainly always invite people to

do that and it's right there on the application as well. Please call in so that when you're applying, you're answering it in the right way and all of that kind of thing.

THE CHAIR: Just a little time check here - we've got a little less than 25 minutes. I've got four speakers, there are a couple that are wanting to speak a second time, so just to make sure that we give some balance to the questioning, I'd like to suggest to the committee that those that are coming to the plate for the second time, we won't do a supplementary unless we get a little time at the end. Those that are asking questions for the first time get a supplementary. Is that okay with the committee? Does it seem reasonable?

Ms. DiCostanzo.

RAFAH DICOSTANZO: It'll be one question, for sure. Another item that I was really happy to hear about is the bus service, and I just wanted to know how you came up with that. I know income assistance had supplements; they used to get a certain amount of money for transportation. What methods are you using to track this new way of giving income assistance - free bus rides?

To me it was an amazing idea, as well. How did you come up with it? How are you tracking it? Where are the expenses to the government - has it increased compared to how much we used to give to income assistance and transportation benefits? Now, are you tracking it? How do you know how much that's costing the government?

JOY KNIGHT: I wish I could take credit for the genesis of the HRM bus pass. I cannot. I was not in the position at the time. Absolutely it came from the way that we need to think differently about the services we offer and how we maximize an opportunity within an existing budget.

The beauty of the HRM bus pass is actually, we looked at what our costs are for transportation within HRM that are going out the door monthly to provide a service to a very small proportion of our caseload that was eligible for it. Transportation special needs is only provided for medical and employment-related needs. There's a large number of people that weren't able to access community because it didn't fit that very specific criteria. When you pull together that resource, actually what we were able to do was provide a service to 16,000 eligible clients and their children in HRM. I don't want to misquote the number, but a significantly smaller proportion of the caseload only had that access before.

It is a cost-neutral initiative because that cost of going to a few actually negotiates with HRM a much-reduced cost for the service we were able to use existing. We want to take that principle and innovative thinking - that partnership again - and expand that. We have met with CBRM. We are interested in meeting with other municipalities. Transportation, as I mentioned before, is key to me. It is a significant barrier for our clients moving forward in their lives. We want to take those principles - we're undergoing an evaluation right now of what worked and what didn't work - and we'll take that and move that forward as we have conversations in other areas.

We are tracking year over year. We are tracking the number of clients who have accessed the service to get a pass as well as the number of their children. We're looking at just under 10,000 right now that have accessed that service this year, that have a bus pass. The good thing is that the bus pass is good for a year. Whether you are on income assistance or not, you still get to maintain that pass.

Our evaluation needs to look at why some people are not getting the pass, why are they not signing up for it, and what are some barriers that may exist that we're not aware of that are keeping them from doing that?

The reason first voice is so important to me is because in my position it's hard sometimes to see or recognize what the challenges might be for people without hearing from them what they are. It could be simple things like they have been socially isolated for so long, it's a fear of stepping out. Until we meet with clients and talk to them and we are including them in our evaluation - those who aren't accessing the services - we are not going to address those barriers. A bus pass isn't a solution for that person at this time. We have a lot to do to make sure that everybody is lifted up in our province.

THE CHAIR: Mr. Jessome, a question and a supplementary, if you need it.

BEN JESSOME: Firstly, there were comments about focusing some income assistance programming on non-income assistance clients as a means of kind of maintaining and ensuring that they keep building versus going in the opposite direction. I'm wondering how these individuals are targeted, in the context of while I don't believe for a moment that - I represent a community that would be most served by these types of programs. I'm from the Hammonds Plains-Lucasville area.

I do want to suggest that there are a number of individuals - I'm thinking seniors particularly who have been living in their homes who may be on a single income at this point, widowed or what have you, who are not quite in that category, but at times need some assistance or, as another example, families who are trying to maintain and a spouse loses a job or becomes disabled. Those are the types of instances that I encounter where supplementary funding, or some gap or bridge funding, would be helpful. I'm wondering, have circumstances like that been considered at your table when it comes to focusing programming and funding on non-income assistance clients?

JOY KNIGHT: Absolutely, it is within the Building Vibrant Communities grants. They are not specific to ESIA clients. They are targeting all people living in poverty in Nova Scotia. I can see my colleagues have something to add about specific grants that are supporting seniors. We heard about transportation. That is absolutely something that's happening.

In my own conversations around transportation specific to clients, as we look to build capacity within community, we would hope that the result is that other people are able to take advantage of that service too. It doesn't always need to be built for just our



clients. I'm not sure what that service looks like, if it's a door-to-door transportation service we're looking at in the community that could benefit everyone - particularly seniors or low-income Nova Scotians and not just our clients. We are absolutely keeping that lens in our mind as we try to be innovative in our thinking and develop new opportunities within community.

Specifically to accessing and expanding services for low-income Nova Scotians that Bonnie mentioned within ESIA, we are very fortunate to have received money through the Poverty Reduction Government Innovation, PRGI, where we are very focused on small-scale testing - how we start to take this approach - because it's really about capacity, not about need, as we know, and how we start to reach out into the community more broadly to support our young people specifically.

We have a very exciting initiative that we're going to start to work with the African Nova Scotian community on. We're creating an Afro-centric youth preventive program. We haven't started that work with community yet. We're in the very early stages, as we just received the go-ahead on the funding very recently. That will touch all families in that community. It will be driven by community and what their needs are, and not what we would say they might be. We would not limit the participation in those circumstances.

We also looking at our other youth programming and how we would open it up so that youth at risk are able to participate. The barriers facing low income youth are very, very similar to the barriers facing youth that are attached to income assistance in some way, so we will absolutely keep that lens in mind as we move forward. We really want to test the waters on that - I wanted to be at the table to be part of the proactive solution on poverty and I can't be single focused on income assistance if we're going to really make an impact.

I know Natasha has some information specific to seniors, though.

[11:15 a.m.]

NATASHA JACKSON: I guess this is a good opportunity to kind of highlight again that the community solutions are coming to the fore by community members. The example that was provided around the Eastern Shore project - it really was looking at what the community needs were and what organizations in the community existed that could come together and support families and the community as a whole.

You had raised individuals who may have lost a loved one needing some kinds of supports. In that particular case, it was really unique in that they did look at who was in the community and what was the community needing to be supported. It was mental health and addictions issues, but it also had to do with dealing with bereavement, dealing with the senior population that was actually living there and alone, and offering opportunities to feel less isolated.

BEN JESSOME: Thank you both. Not necessarily directly related perhaps, we referred to an acknowledgement that because of policy changes, many of the programs are being utilized more often. I guess DCS or CCH respectively or together - what means do both departments have to track targets, if targets are being set?

I'm just trying to understand is it acknowledgement specifically that we are receiving more applications or receiving more clientele based on things that are being done or do we have proactive targets to say if we have 10 new clients in 2019, we won't have 20 new clients in 2020?

JOY KNIGHT: For income assistance, when you ask about how we're measuring with the new investments we've made and the new policy changes, we absolutely do measure and track.

We're really looking forward to, not far down the road, a new collaborative case management system that we're bringing in that will change our lives. Admittedly, tracking is a challenge now with the systems that we have, but we do it on spreadsheets all over the department to make sure that we really are following and understand what the outcomes are.

From small things that are really important, like understanding we are now at almost 300 post-secondary students in the department - over five years, that's double the numbers. That's a huge thing to celebrate; we're very excited about that. The tracking is important or else we couldn't speak about our successes, and we also wouldn't be able to understand if that number was going down that we'd know we have to make significant changes to our program standards and our policies, so tracking is critical and key.

I will let Natasha speak to a little bit more on how we are tracking the results within the grants.

NATASHA JACKSON: With every application that comes through a successful grantee that is awarded money through the Building Vibrant Communities grants, all applicants are required to provide final reports on their activities. They're tracking who's coming, what they actually achieved, if there were any barriers to achieving that, were there positive new relationships. That has actually happened a lot with a lot of grants in that they've discovered we've got more support in the community than we had initially anticipated.

With that, as well as a developmental evaluation plan that has rolled out in year two, we are tracking the numbers to see whether or not people are coming back to the program. Whether or not programs are more sustainable. Part of the piece I think that is important to note here is that oftentimes community needs a little bit of a seed funding, so some of the projects were actually small compared to a larger staff. They just needed a little bit of a seed in order to get the process running, and then they are bringing in business and other community partners to actually sustain the investments.

What we have also tracked over the last few years - and we're interested to see what year three will bring - are those applicants that didn't apply again. So we do follow up to see whether or not the program is still running in the community, but it may be running on its own merits.

THE CHAIR: Thank you. I have a couple of extra people added to the list after my time check. I'm not sure we're going to get to you both, but let's forge ahead - Mr. Comer.

BRIAN COMER: Thank you for your presentation. I come from a constituency where childhood poverty is a significant issue. We have childhood poverty rates significantly higher than the rest of the country, and mainland Nova Scotia actually. My question is more so about prevention of poverty, specifically for the ages of infancy to school age.

I saw a lot of great examples of interventions for multiple ages throughout the spectrum, I guess you could say. There is not a lot of talk between infancy and school age screening, especially for those high-risk individuals. I think once they go home to a challenging environment, they're kind of starting off at a disadvantage basically. I'm just wondering what the department is doing in order to identify those individuals, especially in Cape Breton.

JOY KNIGHT: I will do my best to speak to the Child, Youth and Family Services program that really owns that within our department, and I'll be happy to follow up if needed on work that's happening across government. I can say that while I speak with great passion about the preventive work in ESIA, they do the same in the Child, Youth and Family Services program.

We absolutely recognize that by the time children are coming into care, it's sometimes too late for that family and there was a lot of work we should have been doing in advance to prevent that from happening. It is an absolute last resort. Nobody wants to bring a child into care.

There is a prevention and early intervention program in Child Welfare Services. They're looking to make investments and to move forward and expand their programming. They are absolutely talking about supporting what your concerns are - how we can meet with families before they're in crisis, when they're starting to feel a risk, when they just need some support and need somebody to talk to, or they're not sure how to parent. They're looking at building those services. They do exist, they're looking at how they can expand and grow those so that families are supported in community long before they get into any sort of crisis.

Two specific examples are Parenting Journey and they fund the Family Resource Centres as well. There have been some really great pilots that they've done. I know one was in Cape Breton, in Sydney - Families Plus, I believe and I apologize if I'm getting the

name wrong. That is supporting just a few individuals that are at the point of crisis or point of eventually being taken into care.

I know the results of that pilot were that all children were able to stay with their families in their home. They're very focused on the preventive nature of their work as well and sort of turning the system over - instead of being crisis-driven, let's be preventive and keep people from having to come into our system.

BRIAN COMER: Thank you for the answer. My next question is for Bonnie. You mentioned that the blueprint is in the third year that it's kind of undergoing its course. It's a pretty straightforward question: Have poverty rates gone down each year with the program, and are there any specific rates that the province wishes to attain by a certain point - specific goals?

BONNIE STE-CROIX: I wish that were the case. We don't have a means of tracking from one year to the next. We do get the census data every four years. As Joy mentioned, poverty reduction is a long game. That is the only truth around it. We definitely have to be working at this consistently and commit to it for a long term.

What I would say is that we have the anecdotal evidence that there are improvements because of all these projects - 136 projects across the Province of Nova Scotia is a significant amount. In some of the programs in the community, we have participants who are also participating in the evaluation process, and we're hearing directly from first voices what the impacts of these projects are on their lives.

If there were a quick fix, we would be all over it. We are not being deterred by the fact that it is a long game because I fully believe that you need to do everything you can while you can. That's really where we're at right now. We're doing as much as we possibly can and ensuring that most of our Nova Scotians who are experiencing difficulties are at least having opportunities to participate in some of these programs in their areas.

This is the making of the blueprint, so this work will then go into the creation of the blueprint. I have the 2009 document with me, by the way, and we do use that, there's lots of great information in there. We're also referencing every province's poverty reduction strategy. We're really pulling in a lot of information from all across the country and some other countries with similar economies.

The long game is that once the blueprint is out, that will likely be the time that there would be targets set. Perhaps when the blueprint is created, there would be some targets set in that document, but because this is the testing of projects and trying things in communities, we're not placing that out there now where you have to achieve this. There are outcomes, there are outputs, and there are measures, but we're not saying to community that they have to reduce poverty by a certain rate. That would very much be something that we will be focused on.

Overall as a province, and I mean that with every sector, I hope that everyone will get involved - because it does need everyone - and start to work together to help accomplish those targets in the long term.

THE CHAIR: Ms. Leblanc, with about three minutes left.

SUSAN LEBLANC: I just want to follow up on my colleague's question about child poverty. When the Statistics Canada data came out in February that showed that Nova Scotia was the only province that saw child poverty rates rise with more than 5,000 more children living in poverty than the year before, the minister's response - as late as October 11<sup>th</sup> in this past sitting of the Legislature - has been confusion. She has been befuddled, I would say, by this information.

Just to quote her in Question Period on October 11<sup>th</sup>, she said: "... when Statistics Canada came back with those particular numbers, we were actually surprised, quite frankly, because the numbers flew in the face of what we knew to be true . . ."

I know that she talks about the market basket measure and all of those things, and there are things that aren't going into those numbers. I'm just wondering, and anyone can answer this - with your work on this file of poverty reduction and being on the ground, do you think that the Statistics Canada numbers are accurate? If so, I suppose, how are the projects that are being funded directly addressing child and family poverty?

I just want to say, especially given your answer to my previous question, that in order for these grants to even work, there needs to be an organization on the ground to apply for the grants and to do the program. Given that that's not happening all over the province, can you speak a little bit about (a) if you think that the Statistics Canada numbers are real and true; and (b) how the program is addressing child poverty?

JOY KNIGHT: As I mentioned previously, obviously I meet with clients all the time. We talk about the families and their experiences, so I certainly know that child poverty is a reality in this province, and we're hearing it. We know that more needs to be done in that area.

I think for child poverty in particular, it isn't an ESIA-specific issue. A majority of people living in poverty are not attached to Community Services, so that's why it's so important for me to be at the tables with the departments that can really impact those child poverty numbers and the families that are living in poverty but aren't able to access the resources or supports through income assistance. A lot of those are in the low employment income families.

There is a lot of collaborative work with the Department of Labour and Advanced Education, Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, and Department of Communities, Culture and Heritage to reach into those communities. Absolutely, at the forefront of our mind is that we need to make progress on those child poverty rates, and it

needs to be done broadly and holistically and outside of just the Department of Community Services to really make an impact.

[11:30 a.m.]

We can speak specifically to the grants that were done. Bonnie.

BONNIE STE-CROIX: I would say, first of all, that I'm very familiar with the data. I believe that the 2017 numbers that came out are correct. I'm one person - I don't have that much weight. I believe that, regardless of what that number says, we all understand that child poverty exists in this province. I know, as Executive Lead for Poverty Reduction, that that has been an emphasis for me and a passion for me for most of my career.

I would say that we have a significant focus on it, and in fact, when the data did come out, there was some work that was done between the province and federal government to dig down into the numbers and figure out a little bit more. As a result of that, that is where the focus on children and families living with lower incomes comes from. I mentioned earlier in my presentation that we're going to be focusing 50 per cent of all streams of funding for the poverty reduction work in year three on children and families. We also have some other things under way right now that we're working on; we hope we can get to it certainly in the next year. There are lots of things that we're working on that focus specifically on that.

Many of the projects directly impact children and directly impact parents as well. I have to say that many of the youth that we work with are also parents, just to speak to the fact that this inter-generational poverty, the interventions that happen that we may think of as early intervention do need to happen at all ages. When you have young parents, the intervention needs to happen for the youth as well as for their child.

I think that we are trying to tackle that from all levels. In our partnerships right now, we're talking about BVC grants so that these things, as they come to us from community and they are defined as priorities from communities, we are able to fund those. We have other projects that happen through the government stream that are also focused on children and families as well.

We had five social innovation labs that occurred through the poverty reduction work. One of them occurred in the Tri-Counties area, and it was focused on child care alternatives. We have been working very closely with communities from Yarmouth to Digby about opportunities to look at alternatives to child care. Then we'll be testing some of the ideas that the community co-designed around that, which again is a direct impact on families and children.

I don't want to take up too much time. I recognize that we're out of time, but we could also speak about it another time if you would like to follow up on it.

THE CHAIR: Thank you very much; we did run over time. It's an important topic, with important questions. I just wondered if you wanted to take two or three minutes and make some comments to wrap up. Ms. Knight.

JOY KNIGHT: I'll be very brief. I just want to thank the members for inviting us here today and for your interest in this work. As you can see, we're very committed to it and very passionate about it, and we welcome the opportunity to share it and are looking forward to providing the members with updates on the excellent outcomes for our clients. Thank you.

THE CHAIR: Thank you, Ms. Knight, Ms. Jackson, and Ms. Ste-Croix. On behalf of the committee, I want to thank you for all of your work. I certainly appreciate your approach to first voice and digging down into the complexities of this issue. It's exciting, the variety of initiatives and how you're building partnerships and working on the ground with communities that are living this every day. We appreciate your passion and your hard work on a very complex and challenging issue that's important to all of us and all Nova Scotians.

Thank you very much, and you can now excuse yourselves from the table. We have a bit of committee business to do.

Order. We have a few items of business to deal with. The first item I would like to deal with is the annual report, which has been circulated. I don't believe there have been any changes requested by committee members. I'm wondering if I can have a motion to accept the annual report to be tabled in the Spring in the House. So moved by Mr. Jessome.

Is there any further discussion? Would all those in favour of the motion please say Aye. Contrary minded, Nay.

The motion is carried.

We've got four pieces of correspondence in our package and some of them are related to our agenda setting. I just want to go through each of these and have the letters received by the committee and then we can move on to agenda setting. I'll just start with the easy one first - the October 23<sup>rd</sup> letter from Joy Knight with additional information requested by the committee. Is it agreed to receive this letter?

It is agreed.

We also have a letter from Minister Regan addressed to Ms. DiCostanzo respecting correspondence from the Benefits Reform Action Group. I don't think there's any particular action required. Can we agree to receive this?

It is agreed.

The Benefits Reform Action Group letter dated August 23<sup>rd</sup> - the essence of this is that group is suggesting that Mr. Grant be asked to be a witness on ESIA transformation. I believe - and I'm just trying to confirm this, but haven't got a response - that Mr. Grant has moved on to Housing. I just thought the committee should know that.

Each caucus has topics to present and if they wish to follow the advice of this group, you certainly may do that. Could I have agreement to receive the letter from BRAG of August 23<sup>rd</sup>? Is it agreed?

It is agreed.

Finally, we have a letter from the Chair of BIG-NS with respect to a request to appear to provide information about basic income to the standing committee. Again, each caucus could add that to their list for consideration, which we are about to deal with. Is it agreed to receive this letter?

It is agreed.

With that, you've got before you suggested topics from each of the caucuses. The Liberal caucus will propose three topics to the committee, the PC caucus will propose two, and the NDP will propose one. Of course, there is the list reflecting requests from the public to appear that each caucus could choose to put at the top of their list.

I would like to begin with the Liberal caucus topics - Ms. DiCostanzo.

RAFAH DICOSTANZO: I'd like to add the three first items on the agenda: The Families Plus program, the Adult Service Centres, and Employment Support Services as our subjects.

The witnesses, and I'll read them as well, one by one. For the Families Plus program, the witnesses will be the Department of Community Services, Deputy Minister Tracey Taweel; Leonard Doiron, the Executive Director of Child, Youth and Family Services; and also Nancy MacDonald, with Family Services of Eastern Nova Scotia.

THE CHAIR: Maybe we should deal with each one individually, then. We have a motion from you with respect to that topic. Is there any discussion?

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

The motion is carried.

Let's go onto your second topic, Ms. DiCostanzo.

RAFAH DICOSTANZO: The second one is the Adult Service Centres. For the Department of Community Services: Deputy Minister Tracey Taweel; and Maria Medioli,



executive director of the Disability Support Program. Also, Mike Townsend from the DIRECTIONS Council for Vocational Services, and Bob Bennett with the Summer Street Adult Services Centre.

THE CHAIR: Is there any discussion? Would all those in favour of the motion please say Aye. Contrary minded, Nay.

The motion is carried.

Third topic, Ms. DiCostanzo.

RAFAH DICOSTANZO: The topic is Employment Support Services and the witnesses are, again, for the Department of Community Services, Deputy Minister Tracey Taweel; Joy Knight - who was here today - the Acting Executive Director for Employment Support and Income Assistance. Also we'll have Dave Rideout, the CEO of MetroWorks; Mary Fox, the Executive Director of Community Inc.; and Russ Sanche, Executive Director of the Portal Youth Outreach Centre in Kentville.

THE CHAIR: Is there any discussion? Would all those in favour of the motion please say Aye. Contrary minded, Nay.

The motion is carried.

Let's now move to topics suggested by the PC Party. Mr. Comer.

BRIAN COMER: Child poverty in Cape Breton. Witnesses: The Department of Community Services and United Way Cape Breton.

THE CHAIR: Do you have any specific names of witnesses from those?

BRIAN COMER: Not right now, no.

THE CHAIR: Any discussion? Ms. DiCostanzo.

RAFAH DICOSTANZO: Yes, for that topic we just want to confirm the names of the witnesses: Deputy Minister Tracey Taweel, and Joy Knight. Just to be confirmed so that we have it on record.

Also as witnesses, we would like to add a witness: JoAnna LaTulippe-Rochon, the executive director of Cape Breton Family Place Resource Centre from Sydney; as well Bernie Miller, the Deputy Minister of Business. Just to add the exact names of who should be as witnesses.

THE CHAIR: Any further discussion? Ms. Leblanc.

SUSAN LEBLANC: Given that this is a PC topic - I don't want to speak for my colleagues in the PC Party - I wonder if there's a way that we could agree on the people at least from the department, but also add whoever would be the executive director in Cape Breton, of the programs that are happening in Cape Breton.

We don't know who that is right now, but leave a place for that and then perhaps offer the PC Party to suggest community organizations working in Cape Breton, rather than the Liberal Party.

RAFAH DICOSTANZO: I would be happy with that. Just because there were no names given with it, so we're suggesting the correct members who are in the departments and I wanted to make a motion to add a couple of witnesses, as well, if you agree with it. You can decide, as well, if you'd like. He's the Deputy Minister of Business as well, it may help you with your subject.

THE CHAIR: So maybe I'll turn it to the PC caucus. Are you comfortable with the Executive Director of the Cape Breton Family Place Resource Centre and the Deputy Minister of Business to appear as witnesses?

[11:45 a.m.]

BRIAN COMER: That's okay, as long as we can add our own as well.

THE CHAIR: This is the time in which you bring forward the witnesses. What I would like to suggest - perhaps, since you don't have the names here - is that we go with those, and if you want to amend that, maybe we can talk about it at the next meeting. It may be two or three months out. Does that work for folks? Okay.

We'll amend your motion to include those two additional witnesses and a clarification of Deputy Minister Taweel and Joy Knight on that topic.

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

The motion is carried.

Your second topic, Mr. Craig.

STEVE CRAIG: We would like to add the topic of affordable housing, witnesses from Housing Nova Scotia, and that could be the CEO of Housing Nova Scotia, as well as the Affordable Housing Association of Nova Scotia, and Claudia Jahn is the name I have in mind.

THE CHAIR: Any further discussion? Ms. DiCostanzo.

RAFAH DICOSTANZO: The Deputy Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing - is that the person?

STEVE CRAIG: The executive director and CEO of Housing Nova Scotia. The name escapes me right now.

RAFAH DICOSTANZO: I have the Deputy Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing - it's Nancy MacLellan. Is that correct? That's right? The deputy minister or designate, correct?

THE CHAIR: The motion is amended to include Nancy MacLellan and Claudia Jahn.

Ms. Roberts.

LISA ROBERTS: Just on that front, I hope that we would also have the head of Housing Nova Scotia, who is not at the level of the deputy minister. I assume that the deputy minister can bring their witnesses as they always do.

THE CHAIR: Right.

LISA ROBERTS: So Nancy MacLellan would bring the right folks from Housing Nova Scotia.

THE CHAIR: All right. We'll agree to Nancy MacLellan and/or designate from Housing Nova Scotia. (Interruption) I'm sorry, Mr. Craig. I didn't acknowledge you, so your microphone wasn't on. That's my fault, sorry. Go ahead.

STEVE CRAIG: I simply said that I expect that anybody who we request would bring their support staff if they're in a leadership position, that they would come with the appropriate staff to talk to us.

THE CHAIR: I think that's a fair assumption.

The motion is on the floor. Any further discussion? Would all those in favour of the motion please say Aye. Contrary minded, Nay.

The motion is carried.

Now, the NDP caucus. Ms. Leblanc.

SUSAN LEBLANC: We would like to put our second topic forward: Funding for community arts organizations. The witnesses would be the Deputy Minister of Communities, Culture and Heritage, Justin Huston; perhaps Chris Shore - I forget his exact

title now, but he is executive director of something in culture, maybe executive director of culture.

Also representatives from 1588 Society, and we're putting forward Michael Erwin as a starting point; the Bus Stop Theatre Co-operative, and that would be Sébastien Labelle; the Eyelevel Gallery, which would be Sally Wolchyn-Raab. I can give you the correct spelling of that. Do you want that now?

THE CHAIR: Any further discussion? Mr. Jessome.

BEN JESSOME: Just food for thought - I'm just curious - I don't know much about - I know that's why we're suggesting to bring them here, but what is their connection to this committee - community arts organizations?

SUSAN LEBLANC: To clarify, you're asking what community arts has to do with Community Services in general? I think if you look at the description of this committee, Communities, Culture and Heritage falls under the auspices of this committee, in that cultural organizations are a service to the community. It's not just DCS.

THE CHAIR: Thank you, Ms. Leblanc. Any further discussion? Would all those in favour of the motion please say Aye. Contrary minded, Nay.

The motion is carried.

That's the agenda for the upcoming six meetings. Ms. Roberts.

LISA ROBERTS: I'm wondering if we can give some consideration to the request to appear that came not through the caucuses. Is that to be discussed at all?

THE CHAIR: I thought I made that clear earlier on that each caucus could have the opportunity to set aside one of their topics and take those topics. I think we did that recently in the Health Committee in which the Liberal caucus set aside one of their topics to deal with the request that we got externally about vaping.

I think that's sort of the best way that we can accommodate requests, because we could have quite a number of external requests and we have to find a way to manage those. I think it's best to do it with our agenda setting with respect to our caucus priorities that we bring forward to this table.

LISA ROBERTS: If I may, I have had the experience on another committee of a request coming from the community. I admit it's a bit more complicated when there are three requests that have arrived at the same time, but in another committee - I think it was Resources - the committee agreed, yes, let's put it on the list, and it became one of the topics.

I appreciate it when citizens are engaged enough to understand what committees are doing and to take that step of asking. At least one of these groups, I advise them - we only get one topic, it's very difficult for us to put you forward because we get one, but I have seen this work in the past where a very legitimate issue didn't end up on the agenda. I appreciate what you're saying. At the same time, I sort of regret that we couldn't consider it a bit more fulsomely.

THE CHAIR: Alright, thank you. Our next meeting will be December 3<sup>rd</sup>. Kim is standing in to support me on this and we were just trying to confirm the topic for the December 3<sup>rd</sup> meeting, which we think is one of the six that we just approved - the Department of Community Services, Employment Support and Income Assistance. If there is any change to that, I'll have the clerk confirm with the committee. That's what we'll be dealing with. That was one of the three Liberal topics.

Mr. Craig.

STEVE CRAIG: My understanding was that after the Fall session, these committee meetings would be televised through Legislative TV. Is that my misunderstanding or is that to have happened?

THE CHAIR: I don't know the exact answer to that question. My understanding is there is an intent to move there, but there are technical reasons. Legislative Counsel had more accurate information than I have.

GORDON HEBB: That is my understanding of the plan, but I think there is more to be done. I don't know if there was a specific time between now and the next sitting, but I think that is planned. The people behind the glass would know more than I would, but I think there are some technical aspects to be implemented first.

THE CHAIR: Anything else?

The meeting is adjourned.

[The committee adjourned at 11:53 a.m.]