

HANSARD

NOVA SCOTIA HOUSE OF ASSEMBLY

STANDING COMMITTEE

ON

COMMUNITY SERVICES

Tuesday, December 3, 2019

Committee Room

Employment Supports for Income Assistance Recipients

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COMMUNITY SERVICES COMMITTEE

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WITNESSES

Department of Community Services

Tracey Taweel, Deputy Minister
Joy Knight, Executive Director

Community INC

Mary Fox, Executive Director

MetroWorks

Dave Rideout, President/CEO

Portal Youth Outreach

Russ Sanche, Executive Director



House of Assembly
Nova Scotia

HALIFAX, TUESDAY, DECEMBER 3, 2019

STANDING COMMITTEE ON COMMUNITY SERVICES

10:00 A.M.

CHAIR
Keith Irving

VICE-CHAIR
Rafah DiCostanzo

THE CHAIR: Order, please. I would like to call this meeting to order. This is the meeting of the Standing Committee on Community Services. We're here today to receive a presentation from the Department of Community Services as well as Community INC, MetroWorks, and the Portal Youth Outreach, all regarding employment services and supports for income assistance recipients. My name is Keith Irving. I'm the MLA for Kings South and Chair of this committee. I would like to ask my colleagues at the table to introduce themselves.

[The committee members introduced themselves.]

THE CHAIR: Mr. Jessome has just arrived, who is the MLA for Hammonds Plains-Lucasville. Welcome, Mr. Jessome. We have regrets from Susan Leblanc, the MLA for Dartmouth North.

Just a few housekeeping items. In the antechamber, there's water and coffee for everyone. In case of an emergency, we will exit out Granville Street, around the building and up, and meet at Parade Square by St. Paul's Church. A reminder to turn off your cellular devices or at least put them on vibrate, and a reminder that only accredited members of the press may take pictures during the proceedings here today.

One of my roles as Chair is to make sure that we proceed along here and get everything recorded in Hansard, and that involves me needing to recognize you before speaking, so in the back and forth of questions, please wait for me to recognize you.

With that, I would like to turn to our delegation here today. I understand we'll be receiving two presentations. We'll go along the table for you to introduce yourselves, and then we'll move to the first presentation.

[The witnesses introduced themselves.]

THE CHAIR: Welcome to you all. I'll now turn the microphone over to Deputy Minister Taweel for your presentation.

TRACEY TAWHEEL: Good morning, and thank you very much for the opportunity to be here this morning and to share with you some of the work that we're doing around employment support services. I'm really happy that some of our service provider partners are here with us this morning to talk about EDGE in particular, which is a relatively new program that we are piloting. I know that they're going to have some very interesting information to share with the committee.

Employment support services provides an array of programs and funding to support ESIA clients and their spouses to meaningfully find and retain work, increase their self-sufficiency, and achieve independence from ESIA. In order to do this, a diverse range of services and approaches are needed that can be customized to meet the unique barriers and needs that face the people we serve. The majority of our work is done in partnership with our highly valued community partners like our EDGE colleagues who are here with us today. They help us deliver the tailored responsive services we need to best support our clients.

ESS holds the mandate for employment-focused preventive programming for youth at risk ages 12 to approximately 24. This suite of programming supports dependants of ESIA, and Disability Support Program clients, as well as youth in care, youth attached to the Youth Outreach program, and youth attached to the Halifax Youth Attendance Centre. Our ESS participation numbers have started to reverse their decline and are holding steady above 4,000 for ESIA clients. This is great news and is a testament to recent programming and policy changes that we have made under the department's transformation work.

Creating an employment action plan, or an EAP, with an employment support service client is a critical part of our career planning with them. Some ESIA clients are required to participate in ESS - I apologize for all the acronyms - in order to maintain their full benefits while other clients may participate in ESS voluntarily. Just under half of ESIA clients are not required to participate in ESS, but we want to make sure that for those that do, we are supporting them with our own customized plan to independence.

Employment action plans are created in collaboration with an ESS caseworker and their client and they help to map out the journey for each client and the supports and services they will need to eventually attach to work. This plan is completely unique and customized to an individual's strength, experiences, education, interests and life circumstance.

The length of time for an EAP is also completely unique to each client. They can range from a few months for clients who are more ready for work, to a few years for clients who need significant skills training such as post-secondary education. What is most important is that clients are matched with the right services at the right time that meet their distinct needs.

In the presentation you will see a bit of a case study, if you will, of the typical client that we might support through ESS to illustrate the comprehensive and tailored supports we endeavour to provide. In this example, our client is Jane. She's 52 and has never worked. She has spent her adult years caring for her children and now has an empty nest. She suffers from anxiety and doesn't have a strong connection to the community, but is ready to try work.

Jane is like many of the clients that we support. Many have little to no work experience and face skills-, confidence- and disability-related barriers. Our work with Jane will not be short term. We need to be committed to long-term support with her that builds a comprehensive plan for her success. This will include numerous interventions that gradually move Jane forward on her journey towards independence.

Each step in her EAP builds on the next - with it, hopefully growing her confidence, her sense of self and recognition of her own skills, aptitudes and strength. Taking the time to properly support our clients and ensuring we have the right services in place is central to our work in ESS.

ESS provides a very comprehensive suite of services. Our client needs are diverse and we need to have enough services available in order to meet them. As you can see in the presentation, there are a number of programs available and we have themed them here for you. I will summarize them quickly.

First we have our post-secondary supports for our ESIA clients who are pursuing university or college education. ESS offers help with the cost of tuition, textbooks, child care, Internet, transportation and other education-related costs. Each program that you see listed under this heading also offers program-specific incentives.

Under our transformation work, we have made significant efforts to expand our post-secondary sponsorship and I'm pleased to let you know that our efforts are paying off. We have nearly doubled our participation rates since 2015. We are nearing 300 ESIA clients currently enrolled, and I'm even more pleased to say that our clients now surpass the general student population in completion rates for both community college and

university. This incredible achievement is helping to break down the stereotype of who ESIA clients are and what they are capable of achieving.

Second on the slide you will see a heading entitled Employability Enhancement Programs. These programs provide a variety of supports and services and are intentionally flexible so they may be responsive to emerging needs. They provide pre-employment skills development, work experience and on-the-job supports.

One of these programs is EDGE. I'm excited that you're going to hear more about that today from our amazing partners. Another is Inspiring Success, a relatively new initiative under ESS that works with departments and agencies across the province to provide government work experiences to our post-secondary sponsored clients and high school aged youth.

Last Summer, this collaborative program saw 14 departments and agencies provide 51 high-value jobs to our clients and youth over the Summer. This program, as well, is helping to break down the stigma around ESIA clients. Departments have been amazed at the quality of candidates we are referring to them and are even turning to DSS now as a stop in their casual recruitment process. This is an excellent example of how we need an all-of-government approach to supporting individuals impacted by poverty.

Lastly, I'll draw your attention to the wage subsidy programming. Subsidies are provided to employers as an incentive to hire employment-ready ESIA clients, removing a final barrier to employment. Like all of our programming, we have a variety of wage subsidy programs available in order to ensure we are meeting client, labour market, and employer needs.

There are also special needs that ESS provides to support clients in their employment journey. For example, we provide child care, transportation, employment-related special needs, criminal record and child abuse registry checks, and application support for pardons. We also provide transitional Pharmacare to clients who are exiting our system for employment to ease our clients off ESIA and the supports that they may have availed themselves of within the system. These financial supports help us round out the programming and service supports within ESS.

ESS also delivers the Workplace Support Program on behalf of all Nova Scotians with a disability. The program provides technical aids, assistive devices, and attendant support to Nova Scotians whose employment and post-secondary participation are at risk due to their disability. This program is income tested under \$54,000 annual net income and supported 117 Nova Scotians last year. Our attendant support component of this program is the only one of its kind in the country and is enabling persons with more significant disabilities to participate in the labour market.

The second part of the ESS mandate is to provide employment-related preventive programming to youth at risk. This is an area of exciting recent change and growth within

the department under our transformation work. In collaboration with our community partners, ESS provides a continuum of youth-focused supports to help break the cycle of inter-generational reliance on ESIA. This work is extremely important to us and is absolutely imperative to our efforts to address poverty in this province.

Our preventive programming aims to help our young people build connections to community, enhance their self-confidence, provide them with career exploration and invaluable first work experiences, and support participation in post-secondary learning. All of our programs seek to build on each other, creating a continuum of support that carries a young person forward in their lives, filling in gaps they are experiencing in moving forward. I am pleased to share with you that since we have launched our new youth programs, there has been a decline in youth on our caseload between the ages of 16 to 25 of about 10 per cent.

Just like our ESS programming for ESIA clients, our preventive programs are diverse to meet the unique needs of the youth we support. I'm going to move quickly through these programs today, but we are certainly happy to provide additional information on any of these in follow-up questions. As a reminder, our programs provide support to dependants of ESIA and DSP - Disability Support Program - clients, youth in care, youth attached to the Halifax Youth Attendance Centre or attached to our children, youth, and family services programming.

Firstly, we have our Youth Development Initiative, which provides career-focused community-led programming and wage subsidies for work experience for youth ages 12 to 20. Our Career Rising program, which we previously presented to you here at this committee, is delivered in partnership with the Nova Scotia Co-operative Council to provide skills development camps and work experience in predominantly resource-based sectors and a post-secondary grant to dependants of ESIA clients and youth in care. We are very proud that Career Rising was recently recognized by the OECD as a best practice for youth programming.

Lastly, we have our youth immigrant career exploration project, which is delivered in partnership with ISANS. The project provides employability-focused programming to new Canadian youth attached to DSS that supports their unique needs and challenges. This program has been an incredible success, not just for the participants, but also for the employers that hire these young people. The majority are kept on part time during the school year, continuing to gain invaluable work experience while saving money for their post-secondary studies.

[10:15 a.m.]

We also provide employment supports within residential facilities for youth in care. These services are designed to start working with these youth earlier to ensure they are identifying a career goal, gaining experience in support of it, and are able to transition to post-secondary education where appropriate.

Our Educate to Work Program for dependants of ESIA clients provides financial support to attend the Nova Scotia Community College core programming. We want to provide our young people with a pathway out of poverty, and we know improved access to post-secondary education is key.

Lastly, I've already spoken about our Inspiring Success program. We will continue to grow the success we have experienced to date, but I'd just like to quickly share a story with you about an Inspiring Success participant from a rural community. This story is about a young woman in a rural community who, because of the small size of her community and her family's long attachment to ESIA, felt and experienced a highly stigmatized kind of life within her community.

When she walked through the provincial government doors, typically it was because she was an ESIA client, and people saw and knew that. Through Inspiring Success, she was hired by a government department for a Summer work experience position related to her field of study. She has told us how proud she was and how different it made her feel to walk through the doors of a provincial building every day as an employee and not as a client.

She has also told us how it felt to have her community see her differently - same door, completely different, life-changing experience. This is what Inspiring Success is doing around the province.

A key part of ESIA transformation is the implementation of a new way of working with and supporting our clients. We know we need to continue to do better, and we are building a system to support that. We are investing in a new way of working with and supporting our clients. Our case management approach will be one built on mutual respect, individualized care, and providing the right services and supports at the right time. The new supports will be delivered through a new digital platform with enhanced case management capabilities, assessment tools to inform decision making, and customized training for ESIA caseworkers.

I want to be clear: none of this is about putting clients into boxes. It's about ensuring that staff have the tools, services, and training required to best support our clients on their journey.

The new ESIA case management approach is made up of three pillars. The first is client segmentation. This is a statistical model utilized at intake that broadly informs emerging client needs and supports our ability to proactively allocate resources and develop responses in real time.

The second is needs assessment. This involves the use of assessment tools to best inform individualized client needs and build the most appropriate employment plan. Standardized assessment takes the guess work out of the process and ensures that we are giving informed advice to our clients.

The third pillar is service determination. This is the suite of services we have committed to providing to meet the needs of our clients and their children. We have already implemented new preventive programming, are piloting others such as EDGE, and will continue seeking community partners' advice and expertise moving forward as we continue to grow and improve our program offerings.

As we move forward with implementing our new case management approach, the new intake and online application process, and with the design of our new employment focused programs, we will be working hand in hand with our community partners and clients to reach our desired future state in a meaningful and truly impactful way.

I want to take this moment to tell you that we know we cannot support our clients in achieving their goals without the great work, passion, commitment, and support of our amazing service provider partners. ESS relied heavily on these partnerships and is extremely grateful for the impact they have on moving people - the people that we are privileged to serve - out of poverty and into their best lives. I thank them from the bottom of my heart for the work that they do.

Thank you for the opportunity to share this with you today. I look forward to hearing from my colleagues and answering any questions you may have.

THE CHAIR: Thank you, Deputy Minister Taweel. We will now turn to one of those employment enhancement programs, the EDGE program - Mr. Sanche. I would like to note that Mr. Sanche is a VIC - a very important constituent - of Kings South.

RUSS SANCHE: Thank you, I appreciate that we could be here today to share from the front lines and people that are rubbing shoulders every day with the clients that we all refer to or the folks out there.

Oftentimes when something is designed or at least an application process begins, you don't know if the person designing the application process really has consulted with the right people before you step into the mix of that. But in a case like this early intervention initiative, which was one of the first titles that we saw, that was the case. So the surveying of potential clients gave a lot of great, relevant, principle-based places to start so that we could come together and ask about how that is relevant to what people face every day.

When that surveying was sort of spot on or accurate or helpful, it allowed for us to design something, customize it, not just for the clientele - youth that are 18 to 26 - but also for our own geographic area. You're talking about a rural site and you're talking about an urban site, and they do have different characteristics, but with the input that came from that beginning process, we were then able to really ensure that it was centred around individuals, that the delivery could be practical. We could start to shape it so that the facilitation is not like the classroom experience that they might not have been successful at in school, but rather more effective, more hands-on, and that we have the fluidity to adapt and change. That was built into it.

We welcomed the partnership and what was really awesome in the beginning stage of designing EDGE was that it was the Department of Community Services cheering us on and sincerely wanting input and wanting a grassroots approach or a client-centred approach, you could say. So that's what we began.

It really helped us to partner with the Department of Community Services to say, here is through the lens or the experience of a typical 18 to 26-year-old in Nova Scotia that's struggling with poverty and also other challenges as we've laid it out here. So often we're sort of given the feedback, we just hope they go get a job - it's so much more than that.

I've got some examples. Imagine you live up on the North Mountain or the South Mountain or maybe a certain community in the city and your housing is precarious. The focus of your time is making sure that you've got a place to stay next month, so you're hardly thinking about work. Or suppose in facing poverty, you don't have a phone so getting calls back from your employer is pretty much impossible.

This is what - in the design and the input given from people that are regular Nova Scotians struggling with poverty and struggling with other risk factors, youth - DCS saw we could attest to, and then say how do we shape a program given that? How do we put the right people in place? The cookie cutter approach wasn't going to do it. Having an experience like school, as you can see, there were a lot of hidden challenges - some we knew, but also some you uncover as you get to know people. With a very relational approach that EDGE has, as you get to know people, you realize they really didn't learn to read and write to the same level that we would have hoped they did - saying, you've got Grade 12, but we've got to sit beside you and do the work.

There is all that kind of adjusting because we could say, we know these people and we know their stories, we know the trauma they face and the challenges that they're going to have.

I can think of one person - if I think about the mental health and addictions kinds of challenges that a typical EDGE client has, it's easier to stay home. There's no one that's reminding you about this appointment you have or this opportunity and it takes a lot to get out of bed. So are you going to go to a safe place? How do you create a safe environment for an employment program? How do you be safe people so that they come and participate? This particular person I'm thinking of, Lynn, it's hearing the testimony that once she arrived, she felt like she belonged or that she could stay and press forward.

You wouldn't suspect that a mom would give her son subtle indicators that she really doesn't want him going to his employment program, but that gets uncovered as you dig in and you get to know someone, and they trust you. What was the barrier? What was the obstacle? Well, my mom is nervous and I'm afraid she might take her life so I can't go to the program - things like this that are real stories and real challenges.

Those are the typical characteristics of someone 18 to 26 who is currently not working or not going to college or university, so we have to really begin a journey. From start to finish, it's so critical that the Employment Support Services staff, which would be the person that first gets to know the client, they're new to income assistance and they've got to understand what EDGE is all about so that they can encourage the person to do this first step - what we call a Level 1.

It's often scary because you're sending the person down the street to another door, but let's get rid of that door and instead, let's do that assessment - are you ready for this program - right on site. Then it becomes very much a tag-team approach where the navigator works with the DCS staff person to do that intake, to be introduced early, to see the location, to see that it doesn't feel stuffy in a classroom or that they're not going to have to not be themselves, and with the set-up of this place and food and all these different things.

As you can see with this slide, you're very much navigating. You're on that road with them and it begins with that relationship and addressing and understanding the barriers and then making sure that every single cluster of clients - you look at what their current strengths are but also their barriers, and every single cohort or every single cluster, you could adjust the program to fit those learners and their unique barriers. Look at how much mental health support they have and look at whether there are transportation problems. In a rural context in Nova Scotia, pretty much there are huge transportation barriers.

Can we address all those so that it's easy to come, it's easy to participate, the learning doesn't look like the learning in the classroom? That wasn't your kind of learning. You're a hands-on learner. You want to be in a relational setting and those kinds of things. That was all part of the design, and there are certainly components that are outlined there.

I'm going to turn it over to Mary. That's sort of setting the stage for the client and the journey that we have to take, and those are the three key positions that really are different than other employability programs that exist. This is youth, not adults. They've been challenged and there are multiple barriers.

THE CHAIR: Ms. Fox.

MARY FOX: Thank you for allowing us to be here to talk about the EDGE program. I want to talk about some of the key elements of the program and some of the creative aspects in our implementation of those key elements.

As Russ referred to, there is certainly a critical team approach with the local ESS office. As Russ referenced from the very beginning, we're very fortunate in the Kentville area to work just down the street from the local ESS office. They're able to come with individuals who are interested in the program, to actually come and view the space and meet the staff that they could be working with and just increase that level of comfort.

Sometimes we're actually coming into the kitchen environment of our space or sometimes we're seeing people cooking meals together or eating meals together as their first introduction to this very different type of program.

We work really closely with the ESS staff. We meet with them on a monthly basis and we talk to them on a regular basis to really problem-solve issues as they come up so we can remove barriers together for clients as they're moving through the program. That's a really key piece.

Often that intake part is where our service navigators or our youth case managers are helping to remove those initial barriers that might be preventing them from coming into the program - things like child care or transportation needs, helping them right away with setting them up with mental health services or housing supports so that they're getting those supports put in place right away.

[10:30 a.m.]

Then there's a case management approach. There's a key staff person at both pilot sites who works with each of the youth to develop their own personalized goals - not only goals for employment, but also goals for life development skills. They continue to work with them throughout the program and post-employment to continue offering those supports.

We also offer life skills training. We really want people to be able to get employment and maintain employment and feel successful. That's a key piece of the program. They're doing it with a very hands-on approach. They're not just sitting in the classroom and talking and listening about key materials. They're actually getting opportunities to practise those life skills, and we do that in a variety of ways.

In both centres - at the metro site, they're right there with the Nova Scotia Works centres where they're able to access those programs and support. In our area, we have kind of introduced some of those elements so we're able to have a food instructor come in and actually teach them some food skills. They do a variety of recreation programs to nurture feelings of leadership and self-confidence.

We also introduced community action projects, which is a really wonderful way of not only enabling the youth to feel that they have the ability to act on their community and positively affect their community, but the community is also starting to see a different view of youth, particularly youth in poverty, who are actually taking initiatives to improve on their community. They have done presentations on addictions in the community. They have done environmental-type programs. They are getting local recognition for the work that they are doing, which is not only wonderful for their self-esteem and confidence but also helps later on when we're trying to connect them with employment.

We also obviously do job search skills and job-related training. That's customized training related to those specific career goals of each participant. They also engage in a variety of community-networking opportunities. Not only do they attend job fairs, but they've also volunteered in assisting with business networking events.

We've introduced a mentorship program so that youth can connect with their career aspirational goals. Our job developer connects with people in the community for them to have those engaging conversations to help them really set a path for their true career aspirations. We're helping them not only with short-term employment goals, but also really keeping their eye on the prize with those long-term career aspirational goals.

We also have a variety of job shadows and job development opportunities so that people are able to test out a variety of different types of employment before they move into those jobs. When we're working with clients with high levels of anxiety in particular, that really removes some of those barriers and enables them to really feel more comfortable moving into those employment opportunities.

Moving into employment, the support is ongoing, so our job developers provide ongoing support to the youth. Because the youth have developed a very close relationship with the centre, they're continually reaching back in for a variety of supports whether it's help navigating transportation issues or family issues or navigating conflicts with their employers.

The employers, as well, have been offering incredibly supportive opportunities to youth and they've really been able to demonstrate their commitment to training youth and working with our staff so that our youth can be as successful as possible in those employment opportunities.

Just to give you some visuals, that's one picture of our youth panel which is quite exciting. A number of youths with very high anxiety actually coordinated a conference around the area of addiction. They introduced all the guest speakers, coordinated, advertised it, and facilitated it.

One of our youth - regarding career aspiration - his ultimate career goal is to be an editor, so our job developer was able to connect with him the local paper called *The Grapevine* and they gave him the opportunity to go and see a local play and write an article about the play and then help them kind of work through how you would actually edit a piece to put in the paper. Now he's currently working at the local Staples, but that ability to really keep his career goals at the forefront makes the program worthwhile for the youth because they don't feel that we're just trying to put them into employment - we're thinking about the long-term goals.

The Community Inclusion Society also partners on one of the Nova Scotia Works centres. There has been a lot of collaboration on programs that benefit the individuals in the EDGE program, so our job developers from both programs work together to offer a

variety of career panels. They're able to invite local employers who are of interest to the local youth that are in our program to come and discuss what types of jobs exist and how they can navigate the employment.

There was a really great story where there was a local construction company who was able to tell the youth in attendance that he would not hire anyone without experience. One of our youth from the EDGE program was able to challenge him and to let him know that that's not fair - there are lots of youth who, with a little bit of training, could be excellent employees.

That employer really listened to that youth, questioned his own recruitment policies, offered that youth a job, and he's still with him. He went through the whole summer and he's still with him today. That was a really wonderful opportunity to put youth directly in front of employers and also to challenge some of the employers' expectations and assumptions.

We also do a variety of team-building activities. We give the youth axes in the Kentville area for recreational opportunities. We have a community art installation in the Kentville area. There's pictures there of some of the cooking skills and some of the recreation programs that not only provide group cohesion, but also helps them develop tools to manage some of the mental health challenges they might have that will help them maintain their success and employment later on.

There's also a picture there with our Mayor, Sandra Snow, recognizing our youth who are doing a community clean-up project - you might recognize the Premier in that picture letting everyone know that he loves the EDGE program. We've shared some quotes from some of the programs. There have been a number of surveys and also focus groups with the youth from both programs who are able to attest to the amount of support that they have in the program - not only support from each other, but the participants and the skills and confidence that they've gained through their participation in this program.

One of the key learnings we've discovered from the past year is really the high level of engagement from the youth. The youth are really invested in employment and one of the things that our job developer hears on a continual basis is how happy youth are about being employed, how meaningful it is, how much they enjoy the structure of employment and the confidence that they're gaining and being part of a team and community. Also, the engagement that we've had with employers who really want to work with youth and who want to offer that mentorship opportunity to youth has also been phenomenal.

One of the resounding things that comes out of any kind of survey with the youth is the critical aspects of those basic necessities that are being offered, whether it's support with transportation, having a safe space to work out of, and access to food. For some of the youth, the food that's being offered in the program is maybe the most significant amount of nutrition that they're able to get.

It's critical to also recognize that the majority of the youth are living with some form of mental illness, so there's a high level of anxiety and depression that the youth are experiencing. In addition to connecting them with provincial mental health services, both programs have also offered additional supports to try to help respond to that need.

In the Kentville office, we have a partnership with the Canadian Mental Health Association where they go weekly to mental health resource management. In the metro office, they were able to hire a new staff person who has a Master of Social Work background to be able to offer that additional support within the program.

I will pass my presentation over to Dave. Thank you.

THE CHAIR: Mr. Rideout.

DAVE RIDEOUT: Thank you. I'm going to echo what my colleagues said earlier and thank you for the opportunity to be here this morning to talk about the EDGE program.

I'm tasked with talking about results, which can be statistically really boring. What I'd actually like to talk about are the tangibles and the intangibles in these projects, the tangibles being the number of people involved, the number of jobs that we have, the number of workshops, et cetera.

A lot of ways in these projects the intangibles are more important. It's those feelings of self-worth that come from being involved in these types of projects, the knowledge that you're not alone. When you look around a room, you see people who are going through the same thing that you're going through, and that gives you a sense of community. A lot of us struggle individually in our own worlds and you don't realize until you're in a program like this that others are dealing with the same thing that you're dealing with. That feeling of not being alone really helps improve somebody's self-worth.

When you see somebody who has gone through the same thing that you've gone through succeed by finding employment, it makes you realize that you can find employment too, that you can do it. If they can do it, you can do it. That's the advantage of being in these sorts of peer support programs.

I think the knowledge that the youth have when they come to this program is that there has been a lot of work put on the front end of this, like through surveys, that this is something that the government is investing in - so they're investing in me as a youth in this program. That brings out that feeling of self-worth, that if I'm being invested in, I must be worth something. That helps them strive to succeed.

What we see over and over again in these programs is the need for additional supports. The youth who are coming into our programs have a variety of different barriers to employment. It really runs the gamut between social and economic opportunity, and a lot of times they just don't know where to go. Even if you give them all the tools in the

tool box - help them with their resumé, help them with a cover letter, all this stuff, and do job finding workshops - it still doesn't help them get to where they need to be because they just don't have that skill that they need to be able to move forward.

We have youth in our program - we work in metro, and in metro you can get around on buses, but we have youth in our program who have never been off the Halifax peninsula. So if you ask them to go find a job in Sackville, it's like asking them to go to the moon. They have no concept of how to get there.

STEVE CRAIG: They can call me, Dave.

DAVE RIDEOUT: Yes, right. It's so outside of their realm of experience that they just cannot even fathom how they do that. Through the EDGE program, one of the things we've been able to bring on is youth navigators. Those individuals can really sit down with those youth to help them troubleshoot through some of these problems, to actually be able to take them on a bus with support and take them out to where they need to go, to show them, to help de-stigmatize or desensitize some of these issues that they're trying to deal with, and again, to make them realize that there are other opportunities out there. You just have to have that support to be able to access them and show them how to do that.

When you're working with youth, especially with mental health and stuff, you're dealing with some very complicated issues. There's no one program that fits all solutions to that. That's the great thing about EDGE, we're able to deal with youth individually and meet them where they are to help them work through their individual concerns and to then support them as they go through - and the idea that failure is okay. A lot of times in our society, failure is looked at as a bad thing, so the easiest way not to fail is to never try.

With these youth that we're looking at, it's helping them to understand that failure is okay. You can see some of that in the employment results. When you look at 58 jobs secured, that's 58 individual jobs of which 40 youth are still currently working, which means that some of these youth have had more than one position. In a lot of other ways, starting a job and either realizing it's not for you or quitting or getting fired or whatever would be a real hit to the self-esteem and really make youth disengage and go back to sitting in the basement again and going back to what they were doing before. But through the support of the program, we try to help them understand that failure is okay. It's good to know what you want to do and it's good to know what you don't want to do. Both of those things have equal value.

We can continue to provide that support to allow them to fail and allow them to move into the next opportunity. What we've seen in this program time and time again is that we've had youth that have cycled through one, two, three, sometimes four employment opportunities before they finally find that one that fits with them. That's the sort of support that programs like this can provide.

[10:45 a.m.]

Again, there are a lot of numbers that we've put in here that you can look through at your leisure. We've been talking for a while, so I think I'm going to end this presentation on that note and allow the committee members to ask us any questions that you feel are appropriate.

THE CHAIR: Thank you all. Now we will move to questions. We'll do a question and a supplementary if needed. Depending on the list after the first round, I may cut it back to no supplementaries, but we'll gauge the time - we've got about an hour or so. We'll begin with Mr. MacKay.

HUGH MACKAY: Wow, it's hard to start with questions instead of congratulations and thank you. It is a marvelous program, from what you've presented. I appreciated you speaking to rural challenges because they can be quite different - finding Sackville aside - but they can be challenging, of course, for many of the things you've mentioned such as phone access or even cellular Internet service, transportation issues and so forth.

The question I have, I'm going to pose it to the department. The EDGE program, from what we've heard, is a very successful program. I wonder if you could expand on how similar activities or programs are occurring in other parts of the province.

TRACEY TAWHEEL: Yes, certainly with the EDGE program, we are seeing tremendous success and I would say tremendous potential with the program as well. EDGE is in a pilot phase right now, so we're currently evaluating. I would describe it as evaluating in real time in partnership with our service providers, as well as the participants in the program to look at enhancements that might be required in order for us to make decisions in terms of expanding EDGE across the province.

Certainly we do have a number of other programs that are available that support our clients right across the province. I referenced some of them in our presentation - our career program that invites youth into government employment, as well as the youth development initiative. We have a number of programs that support clients right across the province. At present, EDGE is located only in two sites and supported through our three service providers that are here with us today.

Our hope would certainly be that we can move forward with an expansion with EDGE, but first we'll need to complete the evaluation. Our next step will involve expanding the current pilot at its present sites to add in some of the components that we're hearing from participants that continue to be barriers for them, such as transportation, mental health supports and things like that.

HUGH MACKAY: Yes, I appreciate the number and the breadth of the programs that are offered by the department. I think as one of the EDGE presenters pointed out, there

can be barriers to just walking through the doors of government offices though - be it stigmatization or whatever.

So if EDGE is going to be a pilot project, as I understand it, with future expansion, could you give us an idea of how long that pilot might go on and what the metrics would be that you would use for expanding the program?

TRACEY TAWHEEL: I think my partners here at the table really outlined very nicely the components upon which the EDGE program is based - things like a human-centred design, a relational approach to design. It's strength-based, asset-based, things along those lines that went into the program design. Those are the same elements that we will look at in terms of evaluating the model.

We will work with participants to hear from them in real time about what's working. We'll certainly be looking at - as Dave outlined - some of the numbers as well to see ultimately how many youth that come through the program do attach to the labour market. I think it's important that we also look at other successes, not just the number of youth that attach to the labour market.

There are other small successes that are happening on a daily basis as part of this program that, in the long term, will help secure a better future for participants in this program. All of those pieces need to be part of how we evaluate the program. Importantly, I think, as we are trying to do more and more in the department, we need to make sure that the programs and services we design are not designed in a system-protective or a system-centred way but rather in a human-centred way, which is exactly what EDGE models. So our evaluation, likewise, needs to be a little bit different than maybe how we would typically evaluate a program.

Having said that, the program has been under way for a relatively short period of time. We're probably looking at another year, at least, in pilot phase before we can make decisions in terms of adding additional sites or expanding the program beyond those other expansions that I referenced in terms of adding more transportation options and more mental health supports at the existing sites.

THE CHAIR: Mr. Craig.

STEVE CRAIG: Thank you, Mr. Rideout, Ms. Fox, and Mr. Sanche, on the great work you do to deliver on programs to help youth and others to move forward and assist them in breaking the bonds of poverty and to get a level of income that is supportive. In my 30-plus years as senior volunteer in not-for-profits, please accept my utmost admiration and thanks for everything you do in delivering these programs.

On the DCS side, you are so important to deliver what we think is required for our youth, so thank you, too, knowing full well that you don't deliver on these services - the government does not deliver on these services. It's others such as you and the not-for-

profits who deliver on these services, so I thank you. That relationship has to be paramount. It requires a lot of work.

I'm going to focus my comments and questions narrowly because another vulnerable sector is youth in care. I want to focus on youth in care. The 1,000 or so subset of that 1,000 or so youth in care, whether they be in residential facilities - and you didn't define that - it's continuously trying to learn the jargon and to learn the relevance of a lot of these comments here.

Youth in care, whether residential, includes group homes. It would include the Reigh Allen Centre and sometimes Wood Street, foster care and a growing number of those clients who are in a place of safety. As we know through the recent media report, which we knew anyhow, that is happening.

The subset of youth in care is particularly vulnerable and I do thank you, Mr. Sanche, for the EDGE participant justice challenges - hidden challenges: transportation, housing, the instability in poverty. These absolutely define youth in care, so we're talking about the same people.

What I'd like to ask, though, is in the transformation - and by the way, as I get into this, I'm going to my business - transformation is, and ought to be, just standard business practice: continuous improvement. I don't know why we keep highlighting transformation because that's the way it ought to be. The numbers of people who are in youth in care, I'd like to get an idea of how many of those people in place of safety we are focusing on and the EAP, to quote from slide three, "An EAP always needs to be iterative and responsive to changing client needs and circumstances."

How often do we go back and review each of those youth in care; not the ones who have said they are not interested, because their needs change daily, weekly, monthly, yearly when they are in long-term care. We need to understand how that works. So you talked about a tool to track. In that model though - and perhaps it's just an omission that was felt wasn't necessary at this particular time, but it talked about three points or three stages and the management approach. On Slide 12, it talks about the client segmentation. That's what I'm talking about now - the needs assessment, needs and wants, because the client may have wants and needs that have to be explored, then service determination. That's as far as it goes.

What about the delivery and what about the evaluation - that continuous improvement? I'd like to know about that too. So two things - one is about the subset of youth in care and how well we are doing in that. Do we see the numbers growing or decreasing? You made commentary about the full numbers being reduced. I don't know if that's because once we've looked at them once and they've decided not to be in here, we haven't gone back and re-evaluated. I don't know that. Perhaps you can comment on that.

What about the continuous evaluation? The evaluation, which our good people here have commented on how sometimes it's difficult to determine appropriate outcomes - what type of evaluation is being done by DCS to say we are successful?

TRACEY TAWHEEL: Okay, there was a lot in that. I will start and I trust that if you have follow-up . . .

STEVE CRAIG: I'm not going to ask a supplementary.

TRACEY TAWHEEL: Okay, thank you very much for your comments and the question. You referenced emergency placements so maybe I'll start there. As of the third week of November, we have approximately 48 children who are in emergency placements. As those emergency placements relate to the employment support discussion that we're having today, I think it's important to recognize that many of those children are young children and therefore we would not be building employment action plans with them. We are, however, importantly, looking to stabilize those children and find them more permanent placements to ensure that their lives are stabilized and that they have the best possible future that they can have.

Sometimes that permanent placement will mean coming into the permanent care of the minister. That is always a last resort, as I think you're aware. We seek to find appropriate foster care placement, placement in residential care, if necessary, and if there are a variety of placement options that are available. Certainly, reunification and stabilization of their own family is front and centre in that conversation.

When we look more broadly at children that are in care on a more permanent basis - not in an emergency placement setting - there are approximately just under 1,000 children at any point in time in either temporary or permanent care of the minister. We work with those children, depending on their age, to provide them with the supports that they require in order for them to see a different future for themselves.

As I mentioned when I talked about the employment action plan - for some of those children, it may not be an employment action plan. It may be stabilizing those children because they have endured some form of trauma. Clearly, if they've come into the care of the minister, they've endured some form of trauma, and so our first priority needs to be to stabilize those children - make sure they're going to school, they're getting all the supports they need, et cetera. That is our first focus.

When they become a little bit older - some of our programming starts as early as 12 years of age - we look to expose them to other work experiences, other educational experiences that they may not have had exposure to within their own family setting. We have a number of programs that we employ in order to provide that support. Those supports will be provided to the children that you are referencing - children in care. They would also be provided to children who are dependants of income assistance clients, so we do use many of the same programs with all of those children.

[11:00 a.m.]

I think the important nuance would be that the level and the types of supports that are required really are customized and tailored to the unique needs of those children. If they are in the care of the province, their needs are decidedly different in most instances than those children who are still residing in a family unit, for example.

You had another part of your question, I'm just trying to remember the next part of your question. The employment action planning; I believe your question was how we engage with our service providers in terms of the delivery and the actioning of that plan. We engage with our service providers throughout the employment action planning, so as a caseworker is working with a client, they are thinking about what programs might be available that can support the needs of this particular client that I'm working with.

As you very accurately stated in your opening comments, we are a first point of contact with clients, but we are not delivering the service, in most instances, to clients. It is partners like Russ, Mary, and Dave who are delivering services to our clients. Being aware of the services that they can provide, the supports that are available, is always sort of front and centre for our caseworkers as they work with clients to develop a very customized and unique plan.

I also don't want to leave the impression that we develop the plan; I believe part of your question was about evaluation, as well. We don't develop a plan and leave it on a shelf and it's a static kind of document. Human beings are complex, and the way an individual proceeds through their action plan may not map out perfectly in a linear fashion as we might wish that it would or that they might wish that it would.

There is a constant revisiting of the action plan to determine if there are other elements that need to be added or maybe taken away, or perhaps a longer period of time needs to be spent on a particular aspect of an employment action plan. It is a very iterative process, and as I said in an earlier response, we are working hard to make sure that what we're providing is very much human-centred.

Obviously, there are policies, regulations, and procedures that we need to follow, but we are talking about supporting people when they're in a very vulnerable state. It's important that we remember the youth, the children, the parents, and the families that are the recipients of the services that we're providing. We can't be rigid in terms of the supports that we provide; we must be flexible and try to be as supportive as possible in the delivery of those services.

THE CHAIR: Before I go on to the next question, just a reminder to my colleagues to try to be fair to our witnesses with respect to the level of questions buried in a preamble. If we keep our preambles short, we should be able to keep our questions focused on the topic at hand.

With that reminder, I'd like to turn it over to Mr. Horne.

BILL HORNE: Thank you for the presentation. It's well beyond what I thought it might be as far as the number of people and how you succeed to help youth become viable people in the community and working on their own and working for their own families.

Having said that, I think the three groups that are here are probably only a small group across Nova Scotia. Maybe you could speak on that. I find that the supports given by all three groups amazing. First of all, I have to say that your community services are sitting outside the box in doing things like this and trying to improve the lot of people on community services who wish to get out of that.

I just want to ask you, the number of people that you have employed - how much does that cost? It appears from the accolades here at the back: "EDGE has changed my life in the best way possible. I feel so loved and supported." That must be quite a change from when that person first got involved. Could you talk more about the personal touches that you've seen in your groups and maybe comment on how you feel about the program and how you may see it improve with age and time?

THE CHAIR: Okay, so we're starting to weave several questions into one again. I'm going to go to Ms. Taweel first, and then we'll go over to our EDGE group.

TRACEY TAWHEEL: I believe the first part of your question referenced how many service providers we work with. The department as a whole has over 300 service providers that we partner with. Those service providers run right across the province. Three exceptional ones are with us here today, but there are many more right across the province that we work with on a daily basis in the delivery of employment-based programs and also preventive and early intervention programming that support youth who are at risk and a variety of other programs and services that are delivered primarily through these service providers. With that, I'll pass it over to my colleagues.

DAVE RIDEOUT: I'll leap in first. One thing I think is important to remember is that our organizations run multiple programs of which EDGE is one. Because we run multiple programs, we're able to layer in additional levels of support that help augment what we're doing inside the EDGE program that wouldn't otherwise exist if it was just a stand-alone project.

Speaking from the perspective of MetroWorks, one of the things that we layer in is social enterprise. We were established back in 1977 by the City of Halifax to run businesses that would employ the most disadvantaged people in our community. We've continued that legacy over the last 40-odd years. Through our social enterprise programs, we're running businesses that are generating revenue, and we're able to use that revenue to employ some of the most disadvantaged people in our communities. We've actually employed two of the EDGE youth in our own programs, in our own businesses as employees, because we have the capacity to do that.

We look at - what would be the future, what would help augment those sorts of things? For us, it's the augmentation of our social enterprise activities and allowing us as employers to be able to mentor those youth through a supportive work environment, through our own internal programming, such that we can get them up-skilled, we can get them ready, and through partnering with mainstream businesses, be able to then migrate those youth from our social enterprises over to mainstream businesses to allow them to continue their career path.

Ultimately, at the end of the day, the doing is the important piece. You have to go out there and learn from experience. A lot of our youth that we're working with struggle with classroom components and that sort of stuff. They're doers. They need to be engaged. So the more avenues we have for engagement, the more success we have in our program.

RUSS SANCHE: I felt like in the question you were really wanting to suss out that personal element piece. I think that's what's kind of exciting about being a service provider partnering with DCS. It's because there's less risk when someone is themselves. So when you come into a program - whether it's a youth outreach program, which is another part of what we do or this employment program, EDGE, or even Community INC - there's no threat to them being super honest about how hard it is to be there or super honest about struggling with reading or whatever.

Then for them to feel like the environment is one that they can have a stamp on what's being developed, that's really important. That's not a bar they have to reach. It's an open door that they can participate.

I think that what we see time and time again is when you feel understood and you feel known, you can not only risk failure and also success - because some people fear success as much as failure - but also give input to how this thing will be shaped. A service provider with Community Services can make it so open and available.

I think of the young guy yesterday who wasn't in EDGE, got a job, and wasn't quite so honest about reporting his income to DCS and thought he was on the out - thought he was canned. He comes in and he's emotional, because they're scary people, those DCS people - he sits down and he can say exactly why. He has an employer that is telling him he has to drive - but I've only got my learner's, my job is dependent on this. Then he's driving and the police pull him over and he loses his licence and hasn't reported that income, which was so small. He didn't understand how the policy worked, that he could have been reporting the income.

So because you've got a good working relationship and because you can be that buffer, you can sit him down, you can call the worker and say: So-and-so is here, he's struggling, he has some fears that you're going to bring the hammer down - can we talk further about this? Yes, absolutely. Then all of a sudden, they remember the humanity piece because he's not just the other 150 people that they have to deal with all the time, which is a struggle, but there can be a highlight to the human story side. Then the kind of support

they in partnership with us gives him gets him back to the table - let's get back and learn the ability to say no to the employer that's doing something shady and go forward in employment. I think that's the cool piece.

The relationships that exist are critical because you can't just pick up the phone and call anyone all the time, but if you've got that working relationship you can.

THE CHAIR: Thank you for ensuring that folks out there don't think Ms. Taweel and Ms. Knight are scary. (Laughter) I'm going to move on, Mr. Horne, because you did leave a couple of questions in and I just want to make sure we get around the table and people can add themselves to the list again. Ms. Roberts.

LISA ROBERTS: I'm going to see if I might get rewarded with a third question by asking a very short question, which is: What is the budget for the EDGE program in terms of the budget per participant and budget for the whole?

TRACEY TAWHEEL: The budget for the EDGE program is \$1 million. We don't have a per participant cost yet because we're still taking clients into the program, so we'll evaluate that at the end.

LISA ROBERTS: Just maybe a nod - is that a budget for one year? Yes, okay.

As I listen to this - I really appreciate the work and I really appreciate that there are young human beings at the centre of those supports that are needed and each of those human beings come to this with a story. At the same time, it strikes me as just a moment of learning for government because those supports that are nicely illustrated in that circle really speak to the gaps in our public services and our public supports for Nova Scotians in general. While there have been, it looks like 93 people who have benefited from those supports, how many more people are there out there who could benefit from somebody having their back as they try to navigate - be it past trauma and access to mental health or be it barriers in transportation.

Of course, so many of those systems would be actually more cost effective, perhaps, but just more effective in general if they were actually widely generally available. Trying to navigate transportation barriers for individual people, as opposed to actually investing in public transportation at a population level, just seems a bit nutty to me.

Maybe to the service providers - in your experience, how many more people who you come in contact with would benefit from this same range of support and what would that actually look like in your communities?

RUSS SANCHE: It's not a challenging question at all. What I first go to is, if you can have influence in your community and you can help every service provider, every organization, every government department to really do it differently, then together there can be more accessibility, less glass walls, mental health support that is actually in the

community and is actually recreation-based for youth as opposed to sitting in a stuffy office that youth don't want to go to because it's outside of town.

[11:15 a.m.]

It's difficult to answer your question; there are many that have challenges. What I see in an area where a number of service providers and government are working together, they're shifting their focus from rules to elasticity or flexibility together, so I think you get a better read on those numbers. How many are at risk? How many are couch surfing? How many struggle with mental health? How prevalent is it?

When everyone has a similar perspective or vision that we need to make this as accessible as possible, as flexible as possible, and as collaborative as possible, then we'll get a better read on the numbers. I think there's a potential that when you get good reports that things are more hands-on or more experiential and it challenges other employment agencies, for example, educational institutions, or even outreach programs or mental health programs in the community, then not only will we get a better read that there's probably hundreds more that could benefit, but that the methodology would be a bit more dynamic and innovative, you could say. I hope that helps.

MARY FOX: I think the other part of your question is the people that we're working with in the Nova Scotia Works system, for instance - and I'm thinking there have been over 600 people over the last three years - I would say the majority of the people we're working with are living in poverty, and they're across the age spectrum. The majority of them are dealing with very similar issues: lack of transportation, lack of mental health services, issues with access to basic needs. All of those factors are affecting their ability to concentrate on getting employment and maintaining employment.

To your point of those services being more widely available to the full community, if there was a transportation plan that enabled everyone to get to work and be able to maintain employment, additional mental health services, or more affordable housing throughout the province, we would see a very different level of people working and maintaining employment. So I agree with you.

THE CHAIR: Mr. Comer.

BRIAN COMER: Thank you all very much for your presentation, it was great. I know mental health and addictions is kind of an issue that came up across the board here today as significant, especially amongst youth. It's very difficult to treat and very difficult to find a root cause.

I guess my question would be for the deputy minister. For those individuals in foster care who are deemed a high risk for mental health and addictions issues on an intake assessment, what kind of interventions are employed to ensure it doesn't get to the point that it would be like an emergency situation, to kind of avoid that exacerbation?

TRACEY TAWHEEL: I completely agree that providing those kinds of supports is critical for both the clients that we're supporting through the program we're talking about today, the Employment Support Services program, but also for other children and families that we're supporting through our child, youth, and family services program as well.

A child in foster care who might require additional mental health supports, we work with our colleagues in the Nova Scotia Health Authority as well as the Department of Health and Wellness to ensure that those supports are available when they need them. That may mean securing psychology supports or psychiatry supports, whatever is required to support that child. There is a wraparound plan that is put in place to support the child.

In the example that you've provided, the foster family would play a key role in ensuring that they are also identifying other supports that might be required for the child that perhaps their primary social worker maybe is not aware of because they're not living with the child every day. In that example that you've provided, the foster family is critical in terms of providing a stable, safe environment, but also getting to know the child and making sure that the appropriate supports that that child may need are in place and have been identified.

We work very collaboratively. We have case aides that would, for example, provide transportation for the child to make sure that they get to the appointments they need to get to, et cetera. We also work collaboratively with their school or their teachers or any other supports that kind of need to wrap around that child to make sure that they have what they need to be successful.

BRIAN COMER: This is more for the service providers, basically, because you're the experts administering these services. Are there any strategies for mental health and addictions that you think work better than others as opposed to implementation, and is there any way that those strategies could be transferable with your colleagues across the province to make sure they're implemented to increase the rate of success?

DAVE RIDEOUT: Mental health is a very complicated subject to tackle. If you are in a major mental health crisis, there are supports available in communities if you can access them. The type of mental health we see more often than not is kind of low grade: low-grade depression, low-grade anxiety, self-esteem issues. They are a little bit more challenging to tackle because it's hard to access psychiatry services or professional psychologists or whatever. There's an expense to all that. It becomes very challenging.

Through the EDGE program, we have hired a person with a Master of Social Work so that we can provide on-site some of that basic small "c" counselling, as it were, to help support those individuals that we're dealing with. We see it across all of our programs: through our work activity program, our bakery program, and our education programs. It's an ongoing issue. I wish I had a solution for that project outside of having the service providers themselves have that psychological support on-site, somebody with a master's in counselling or something who can provide that sort of service.

A lot of times, it just needs a light intervention. You're not talking about medication or whatever or long things with therapy. It's just a light intervention that they need to help overcome some of these difficulties. It's definitely a challenge, but again, I think having the financial ability to hire people with master's degrees is an important component of that.

RUSS SANCHE: It's a huge hot topic. There was a consultation last Spring with the Department of Health and Wellness. What came out was a proposal for three prototypes. It hasn't gone any further. That's not why I'm bringing it up. The reason I'm bringing it up is that there were three very key things that we forget. Youth seldom cope with their mental health in a counsellor's office. They cope with it in real life, real time, with a link between what goes on in their life and what goes on by an expert's direction. That came out, and the need to be innovative, and it really shouldn't be service providers needing to beef up their budget and hire a person to do that.

That leads to the second part of what came out in that consultation, which is greater authentic collaboration. Those experts could work with these experts and not forget the field of recreation and accessibility and getting it into the community.

The third part was the essentialness of having a collaborative approach, because right now, it seems like where possible it's collaborative - and I'm not talking about Community Services; Community Services is growing in this area of being more collaborative, absolutely - but then it's those other parts, Justice and things like that. You don't want it to get to the point where you're hoping the kid gets arrested and sent to the IWK Secure Care Unit at Waterville so that you finally get a psychiatrist working with a psychologist working with you, but that's sometimes what we're left to work with.

I think just honestly, let's get this going to bring those parties together, out in the community, true collaboration, and something that actually speaks to the age group that we're talking about because sitting with your psychiatrist doesn't solve anybody's problems. It's getting it into real life.

THE CHAIR: Mr. Jessome is next.

BEN JESSOME: I would like to take an opportunity to acknowledge and thank the folks from Opportunity Place and Nova Scotia Works. My office acts as a satellite location, I guess, for these two groups. While we do have a number of people in front of us today, I thought it would be important to acknowledge their efforts as well. My questions firstly, perhaps to the deputy, who talked a little bit about the incentive programs that are accessible for employers or clients of ESIA. I'm wondering how those incentive programs are administered while protecting an individual's right to privacy so that we can avoid that stigmatized scenario.

TRACEY TAWHEEL: Certainly, privacy is always of paramount importance in terms of protecting the privacy of clients while also making sure that they can access the services that they require.

In terms of some of the wage subsidy programs that we have available, we work in partnership with different employers and different businesses to ensure that they are aware of what is available to them from a subsidy perspective. In most instances, the client will identify themselves to their employer and make the employer aware, if they're not already aware through their interaction with the department, of the subsidy and incentive programs that might exist that could be of benefit and encourage that employer to perhaps strike up a longer term relationship with that potential employee who happens to be an individual who is on our caseload. More often than not, the client will self identify that they are on the caseload.

BEN JESSOME: Thank you for that answer, and certainly thank you to all of you for your time here today.

Perhaps back to the deputy, specifically focusing on this cohort of young immigrants that was focused on. I think, for example, there are limitations for immigrant students or international students to access MSI. You need to be in the province for a period of time before you have access to that program. Keeping that example in mind, are there limitations for new immigrants, or does this cohort have access to the full suite of opportunities that a domestic youth would have?

TRACEY TAWHEEL: Those newcomers that you referenced, if their families are being supported through Community Services, they would have access to the same supports that any other Nova Scotian would have access to.

In supporting newcomers or refugees, we do work very closely with ISANS, as I referenced in my presentation. In particular, we would all be familiar with when the Syrian refugees arrived in Nova Scotia. We worked very collaboratively with ISANS, for example, with that population to support those individuals, to ease their transition into both work and life in the province.

Supports and services were provided both within the income assistance program and also within the ESS program, as well, to make sure that the supports were appropriate for that individual, but also what their families, might need as well.

We also host things such as an immigrant youth career fair in partnership with ISANS and have various particular programs that support newcomers to help them overcome things like language barriers - or a very particular trauma in the case of refugees - particular traumas that they may have experienced that would be different than perhaps some of the other trauma-informed supports that we would have in place for other youth or adults that are working with our department.

THE CHAIR: Now back to Mr. Craig.

STEVE CRAIG: To the deputy minister, I'm interested in knowing what the process is, once you've determined a need that your clients require to be fulfilled, to

determine who the service provider would be and, therefore, obtain financial support from DCS or any other department within the province.

[11:30 a.m.]

THE CHAIR: A very nice, concise question. We'll go to Ms. Taweel.

TRACEY TAWHEEL: As I believe I referenced in a few of my questions, the development of an employment action plan, for example, is a very iterative process. We work with the client to assess what assets they're bringing to the table, which would include things such as level of educational attainment or any mental health or disability barriers that they may face. We work with them to help design a plan that will help maximize and leverage the assets that they have, while also helping them tackle any barriers that they might have that could stand in the way, or may have stood in the way rather in the past, and affected their ability to attach meaningfully to the labour market.

In terms of our determination around which of many service providers we may want to work with in support of that client, some of it is very much based on geography. The colleagues that we have here are from two different communities. We have service providers right across the province that offer a whole range of programmatic options. Some of it depends on geography in terms of the service provider that we would work with.

It also depends on the type of service that is required. Certain service providers provide prevention and early intervention programming for children and families, for example. Others would be our employment support service providers. They're providing a different suite of service offerings. Sometimes our service providers have a full caseload, and so we can't necessarily refer a client to that particular service provider.

Like the employment action plan, the determination on what the best avenue is for the client that we're supporting really depends on a variety of factors. It is both unique at the point in time when we're developing the plan and also unique in terms of meeting the needs of that particular client, what they need at that point in time and what they may need down the road.

If you think of the example that I provided in the slide deck on the supports that Jane required, there was quite a lengthy list of supports that Jane might require. That could take upwards of a couple of years, potentially, for us to get to a point where Jane is ready to begin the process of attaching to the labour market. At any point in the delivery of that employment action plan, the most appropriate service provider to support Jane could change because Jane's needs have changed, could change because we have decided to roll EDGE out across the province - well, Jane wouldn't qualify for EDGE, I guess - but any number of other programs.

We are working very hard to look at all of our programming to make sure that it does meet the ever-evolving and changing needs of the clients that we serve. That means sometimes that an action plan might change as well as new supports become available.

STEVE CRAIG: To continue on that thread, if the service provider to fulfill the need identified is full or non-existent in a geographic area, do you work with existing service providers to expand the capacity, or do you look for somebody else to expand program offerings?

TRACEY TAWHEEL: The short answer to that would be yes on both fronts. We look to expand capacity, or we may look to engage with another service provider to expand what they offer. The answer would be yes on both fronts - always with an eye to ensuring that we're providing the right supports for that particular client or clients.

THE CHAIR: Ms. Roberts.

LISA ROBERTS: For the deputy, all MLAs in our offices just recently got some very concise communication about the standard household rate, which is unrolling in January. Our caucus, through an access to information request, asked for the number of households receiving income assistance that would be considered in core housing need, spending more than 30 per cent of their income on shelter after the new standard household rate comes into effect. We know that after the transformation, which we have been hearing about for so many years, 16,150 households - more than half of the department's income assistance caseload - will still be struggling to afford housing.

My question is, given that DCS sets the income levels for income assistance, how is it acceptable that having gotten to transformation, so many Nova Scotians are still not going to be able to afford housing?

TRACEY TAWHEEL: Another easy question. Certainly affordable housing is a priority for all departments in government. You would be aware that the responsibility for housing has transferred to Municipal Affairs and Housing. However, Community Services works in very close partnership with Municipal Affairs and Housing on the very challenging question of affordability around housing. There is an action plan in place that is rolling out through Housing to try to tackle the question of housing affordability.

The supports that we are putting in place through rolling out the standard household rate, for example, we recognize are one step in that process, and to the point that you have made, will make a difference for some that we support, and for others, they will continue to struggle. We will continue, therefore, to look to provide additional supports, as many additional supports as we can, to help individuals who may require, for example, a special housing allowance, to support them in meeting their housing needs.

The question around affordable housing has multiple dimensions to it and I believe requires working in partnership not just within government but also with municipalities,

with the private sector, and with others. That is the work that is outlined in the action plan. That will be led by housing. It is a complex challenge, and one that is certainly front and centre for us, that we know we need to keep a sharp eye and a sharp focus on.

The action plan that Housing has created proposes strengthening co-op and not-for-profit housing sectors and improving accessibility, things along those lines. That work is critically important to tackling this challenge.

I referenced at the start of my response, things like housing affordability, I say it needs to be a whole-of-government focus because things like precarious housing affect people from a health perspective, may affect people in terms of their pursuit of education. I would argue that many challenges like that are sort of foundational challenges, which we need the collective wisdom of many folks who work in government and outside of government to try to tackle.

THE CHAIR: Just before I move to a supplementary, a reminder. We're on Employment Support and Income Assistance as the topic, and our next meeting in January is affordable housing with Municipal Affairs and Housing and the Affordable Housing Association of Nova Scotia. I think we'll get a good opportunity for a couple of hours to be talking about that issue.

Anyway, back to Ms. Roberts for a supplementary.

LISA ROBERTS: To the service providers, for the participants who do attach to employment through the program, I'm wondering what wage they're working at and what challenges they face in the optimal case of success and attachment to employment. I'm picturing a young person trying to help up a household that is still in a both long and deep experience of poverty, which effectively the standard household rate changes are not changing. Can you speak to that?

DAVE RIDEOUT: I'll go quickly and turn it over to Russ. I think when you're talking about living in poverty or access to affordable housing or affordable food or any of those sorts of things, it all kind of circles back around to employment attachment. At the end of the day, all these things are a symptom of poverty and how you overcome poverty. You overcome poverty by changing your own financial situation.

A lot of the youth that we're working with, it's about getting them into that work stream. A lot of times, they're starting at minimum wage jobs because they're entry level, they're youth; they're gaining that experience. But the goal is to make sure that as we're working with them that they understand that your first job is not your last job. This is a pathway that's going to get you further along the line - if you can help them map out that pathway that shows them this job at McDonald's as a cashier can lead to money management which can lead to accounting.

You start to sort of map out that pathway to show them that these entry level jobs are important and that you can move them along that continuum. I think as you move them along that continuum and their income starts to reflect the work that they're doing, then some of those other issues about affordable housing or access to food and all that kind of stuff start to drop away because now they're becoming self-sufficient and they can manage those issues on their own.

RUSS SANCHE: It's a challenging question. I always think of poverty like being in a hole that's about shoulder width and you can't climb up because it's too hard to get your hands so you can see. The hopelessness is huge.

What we're finding is as someone starts to gain the skills or feels some success, you can't separate that from the education and the support of what's going to happen next. There's a lot of fear of if I make money, that means my cheque will go, because they're already starting to grow an attachment or a reliance on that cheque.

We find that it's about building the courage that you can have structure in your life, you can have these routines, you can succeed but then also shifting the mentality that this is what you've earned. So even basic teaching about the pride of what you've accomplished and what you've contributed and things like that, but it's really making sure that your staff are equipped to really do the hardcore math with people. Saying that on income assistance you get \$500, but as you start to work - and it's not the simplest thing to work out with them, the sliding scale and you can keep this part and this part is taken back by this amount - but that's so important because they need to feel that it's not just about dollars and cents, but it's also about that feeling of being satisfied and contributing.

I think it's a real education and retraining because poverty teaches you hopelessness and yet starting to work teaches you that you really do belong, and you have something to contribute and you can feel better about things. I'm hoping that's a helpful piece to the question. That's a big question you asked.

MARY FOX: Just to add to that - because we are working with individuals who are quite inexperienced, so they're just starting their employment pathway - our staff are really trying to imbue with clients that this is one step, like David mentioned, on their career path.

We really are encouraging people to do parallel continued educational updating. For folks who don't have their Grade 12 or have other career aspirations that that continues to be part of their employment goals. Our staff continue to work with them working towards those goals, so even including those mentorship pieces.

Even though maybe someone's now working at Staples and they need to move out of that job eventually to meet some of their employment and career goals, that they continue moving towards their ultimate career path and looking at different educational and career opportunities and other types of job experiences that will help them get there so they can

get to that place where they can be out of poverty on a sustainable level. This is really just one piece of that longer road to where they're wanting to go.

THE CHAIR: Okay, we've got about five minutes left. I think two late-breaking questions, so maybe if we can do it without a supplementary - Mr. Hines, did you have a question?

HON. LLOYD HINES: First of all, I want to thank you all for coming today. It's great comfort to me as an MLA to know that there is a focus within the department on youth and the importance of getting to the problems at that particular level. Coming from a riding where 70 per cent of our case files are Community Services related, it's good to see that this is happening.

[11:45 a.m.]

I just have one question and perhaps I'll direct it to Russ. In terms of working with other departments within the process that you have, how do you find the understanding and co-operation level?

RUSS SANCHE: When you are working with people on the front lines and they care about youth, the partnership can be both critical and amazing. Are they given the time and authority by middle management to make sure that their work is integrated and collaborative? There's a gap there and I've actually spoken to our friends at Community Services about that.

It's really too bad; I came on the scene about eight years ago and we had what was called the child and youth action committee. I've probably got the names all wrong, but there was an initiative to make sure we removed those silos. We went so far but didn't quite go far enough. Are we wrapping everything around youth completely? Not quite, and I think we could go further.

In other provinces, they've got other models and in other places where I've worked, it's the youth at the centre and you make sure those things are completely wrapped around, not just within one department but across departments. Does each department have the same priorities? Does each department direct their staff to make sure collaborative work is in their job description and things like that?

It's a big ship to move but it's so critical to have the best outcomes because the folks at the front line like to work together and they do good work together. We've got to empower them to do that work and, as was said here, to be flexible and fluid enough that the person is at the centre of it, not the rules or the policies. We need a lot more courageous individuals to say the policies are helpful, but they're not the number one thing; it's the individual in the centre of that. I see a movement to that, but I think we could even be more aggressive and more innovative.

THE CHAIR: Mr. Horne.

BILL HORNE: I think we needed some more time and we could be able to get all our questions in.

I think important to me is the value of this type of training or experiences for community groups and individuals, but I'm thinking more now of the immigrant programs. How do you find this immigrant program has been helpful to the immigrant youth?

I think it's very important; do they have different types of mental thoughts about how important it is for them? They want to work on it as best they can and maybe they don't have all the mental stress that other DCS groups or individuals might have. Your comments on that, please.

THE CHAIR: Ms. Taweel, we've got a couple of minutes.

TRACEY TAWHEEL: I'll endeavour not to repeat some of the other comments that I had made with regard to immigrant youth, so maybe I'll speak specifically about the immigrant youth career exploration program.

That program predominantly focuses on refugee students whose families, as I referenced earlier, are attached to ESIA who may be facing serious challenges in terms of their attachment both to work but also to school, as well. The program provides comprehensive supports to those youth that include things like career exploration, employability skills, resumé building, and helping them prepare for interviews in their new home and their new environment.

It can include things, as well, such as safety and technical training which could be decidedly different here than it was in their original home. It also educates them on Canadian workplace culture. The objective, much like all of the programs that we administer under this employment support program is to help youth gain both an opportunity and an eye to what the future can hold for them, but also to build their confidence and the skills that would be required to help them attach meaningfully to the workforce.

The program is working extremely well. We will be continuing it in the future and, as we're doing with the EDGE program, we will constantly be seeking feedback from those who participate in the program so that we can make adjustments and tweaks as required to ensure that the program is meeting the needs of those that it has been designed to serve.

THE CHAIR: Great. Well, thank you very much and we now have a minute or two for some closing comments. Maybe we'll begin with Deputy Minister Taweel.

TRACEY TAWHEEL: I just wanted to touch on - there were a couple of comments made with regard to transformation within the department. The department has been talking

about transforming for quite some time - three, four, maybe even five years. However, I think it is really important to understand that I agree with MLA Craig in terms of constantly moving and changing to be responsive to client needs. That is a priority within the department.

The transformation that is occurring and has been occurring within Community Services is highlighted by some of the comments that my colleague, Russ, made. We are working hard to work differently. We've changed programs, we've changed the way we work, we've reorganized things, but what is at the heart of all of it is working differently - putting a human-centred approach on everything that we do. Whether it's employment supports; children, youth, and family services; or prevention and early intervention programming - we need to stop having a system-centred approach and have a client and human-centred approach.

You will hear us continuing to talk about transformation. When we talk about transformation, that's what we're talking about. When you look at a system as large and complex as government - not just Community Services, but government writ large - that change takes some time, takes commitment, and takes courage to change. I believe that certainly my colleagues both at the table and not at the table today - my other colleagues within government - are up to the challenge and we are working to not only transform Community Services, but to transform the way government works with the clients that it serves.

DAVE RIDEOUT: On a daily basis, MetroWorks interacts with around 300 clients. All of our programs, including EDGE, are voluntary. People are there because they want to be there, not because they have to be there.

These individuals are seeking out our programs to help them better their lives and to help them overcome some of the barriers they have. I think that's the important thing. Sometimes we forget that these individuals want to be engaged in our community - it's just that they don't know where to start. As long as we can help them get to that point that they were comfortable walking in through a door, then it's important that we put them in the right direction.

A question that was asked earlier was, how do you know which service? Again, when somebody walks in through our door, if we don't feel we're the right program for them or if they don't feel we're the right program for them, then it's incumbent upon us to refer them to the next agency that may be able to help them overcome those barriers. For us, it's about having that community knowledge of what's available in our community and ensuring that when somebody makes the effort to get out of bed and expose themselves to this sort of risk, a lot of times, from their own mental health standpoint, that we are ready and able to respond.

RUSS SANCHE: I guess I've never worked in another place ever before where there was such a will for change and a will to listen to people - regular people - and to

constantly be reassessing and re-evaluating partnerships and if they're effective or not, so I'm encouraged. It's an interesting journey. I think if we can maintain those things, we'll be in a good place because I think in this case, people are listening to people and trying to understand and trying to do something different. That's encouraging. Thanks that we could be here with you today.

THE CHAIR: Thank you very much. I really appreciate your final comments. On behalf of the committee, I would like to thank you all for coming in today. It's great when you see partnerships really moving the needle. There's going to be a lot of focus on the cost of this pilot program, but if we are affecting 90 young people that can find their way off of income assistance for the rest of their lives, that's a huge return on investment - not only to the taxpayer, but also to having those people having fulfilling lives.

I want to thank you all on behalf of the committee for the work. To Deputy Minister Taweel and Executive Director Knight, please pass along our thanks to all of your front-line staff who do this important work, and to our three partners here who have shared with us the great work that's going on with the pilot program at EDGE, I want to thank you for that work.

I think your insights from the NGO sector on the clients, because you spend perhaps more time than government is able to spend with them - I think the EDGE program is a testament to the learning from the expertise that you gain working day in and day out with youth at risk, so I want to thank you.

With that, I'd like to adjourn this meeting. Our next meeting will be January 7th at 10:00 a.m. The topic is affordable housing.

The meeting is adjourned. Thank you very much.

[The committee adjourned at 11:56 a.m.]