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STANDING COMMITTEE

ON

COMMUNITY SERVICES

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Legislative Chamber

Child Poverty in Cape Breton

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COMMUNITY SERVICES COMMITTEE

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Legislative Counsel

WITNESSES

Department of Community Services

Tracy Taweel
Deputy Minister

Joy Knight
Executive Director, Employment Support & Income Assistance

United Way Cape Breton

Lynne McCarron
Executive Director

Family Place Resource Centre

JoAnna LaTulippe-Rochon
Executive Director



HALIFAX, TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 10, 2020

STANDING COMMITTEE ON COMMUNITY SERVICES

9:00 A.M.

CHAIR
Keith Irving

VICE-CHAIR
Rafah DiCostanzo

THE CHAIR: Order, please. I'd like to call the Standing Committee on Community Services to order. I welcome everyone this morning. My name is Keith Irving. I'm the MLA for Kings South and also the Chair of this Committee.

Just a few housekeeping items before we get started today. I'll remind everyone to put their phones on silent or vibrate so that we don't interrupt proceedings. Should there be a reason to evacuate the building, please exit to Granville Street and proceed to the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia, and we'll gather in the courtyard.

I'd like to begin, first of all, by asking my fellow Committee members to introduce themselves. Perhaps we'll start to my left here with Ms. Roberts.

[The Committee members introduced themselves.]

THE CHAIR: We're waiting on Mr. Jessome. Presumably he's just running a few minutes late and will join us shortly.

Just a reminder, throughout the course of the meeting, to wait to be acknowledged by the Chair so your microphone can be activated. It helps us with both Legislative Television and Hansard to wait for the Chair to recognize you. Again, with COVID-19 - welcome, Mr. Jessome - please keep your masks on during the meeting except when you

are speaking, and remain in your seats as much as possible. To accommodate that, I'm suggesting that, as we have done in other committees, we have a 15-minute break at approximately the one-hour mark and then extend the meeting 15 minutes to 11:15 - or 11:18 now, based on our start time here.

As well, the procedures in terms of flow of traffic are to enter through the centre doors and exit through our two side doors here - again, part of our COVID protocol.

Today, we have on our agenda officials from United Way Cape Breton, the Family Place Resource Centre, and the Department of Community Services to discuss child poverty in Cape Breton. I'd like to ask the witnesses to begin by introducing themselves.

[The witnesses introduced themselves.]

THE CHAIR: Thank you, and a pleasure to have you all here today.

Just a caution for Committee members and members of our witness table here. One of the presentations had a series of stories about poverty and if you had noticed, there was a revision that came out yesterday. I asked the witness just to be very cautious with respect to the revealing of any information that would identify people that were cited in that. Thank you, Ms. LaTulippe-Rochon, for doing that, and just a reminder to all Committee members that we want to be cautious with respect to privacy throughout the course of the meeting.

With that, I'd like to begin with the opening remarks from the witnesses and perhaps we'll begin with Ms. McCarron - I'm starting to say McCarron with a French accent (laughing) - with United Way Cape Breton.

LYNNE MCCARRON: Good morning. I just turned my computer off because I thought I was going last, but that's okay. It will take a second for it to warm up.

I just wanted to say that I've been the Executive Director for United Way Cape Breton for approximately nine years, almost 10 years, and I came from a non-profit background. My background is in the non-profit sector. I've worked with adults with disabilities, I've worked with children with disabilities, young offenders, and so forth. The reason I joined United Way was because the non-profit sector needed a voice of experience. If we could just tell our stories as the non-profit sector, the money would flow, and it would just be that simple. Of course, it's not quite that simple.

I've been with the United Way and trying to work with different organizations across the counties, across all of Cape Breton to make sure that we work together to highlight the strengths of the communities and highlight the strengths of the organizations in order to be able to generate new revenue, whether it's through corporate, business, government, and so forth.

Basically, what we've done is we've invested in programs that are helping move people out of poverty through housing stability, financial security, and employment programs. We are also investing in children and youth programs, helping them engage in learning, and help them feel part of their communities in a way that is more meaningful to them from an early age right up to high school.

Basically what we're doing is we're trying to invest in different organizations and make sure that they have the proper resources to be able to expand and work with their programs and help build capacity within those communities.

One of the things that we are really good at doing is collaborating. We collaborate with different organizations - bring them together, share resources, expertise and experiences - and build on each others' strengths and make sure that they are working to the best of their ability.

One of the things that we noticed with COVID-19 was that a lot of organizations are very volunteer-led, grassroots organizations and they had some great difficulty in . . . (Interruption)

THE CHAIR: Order, please. Ms. McCarron.

LYNNE MCCARRON: One of the things that we found was that a lot of these volunteer-led organizations had to shut down when COVID-19 happened. They didn't have the policies, protocols, and procedures - all of the things that they needed in place. They were volunteer-led. A lot of them were senior organizations and as a result just closed and didn't know how to get back up and running.

One of the things that we needed to do at United Way was make sure we could get these things back up and running as quickly as possible. We had a lot of Zoom meetings and brought people together. A couple of different organizations had the capacity and had the strengths, so they had the ability to do the policies and procedures. We shared all of them with the organizations that didn't have them so that they could get back up and running and do anything that they needed to do.

One of the programs that we invest in at United Way is the Good Food Bus - because we have food deserts throughout Cape Breton - that brings local, affordable foods to different communities because transportation is also an issue. With COVID-19, we had shut down the bus because we couldn't have food going to different communities, but what we did was create Good Food Packs.

What happened then is that same organization New Dawn Meals on Wheels, they had a dietitian on staff. They created Good Food Packs and made them available to all the non-profit organizations across Cape Breton. All you needed to do was order the Good Food Packs. They were for either a single-person household or a family household. They

could order them, we would pay the invoices, and all we had to worry about then was delivery.

Even at that, we had some organizations that stepped up and said they had closed, but we have a van if you need us for any help. We even facilitated organizations that weren't involved in food security to help with the transportation piece bringing the Good Food Packs from New Dawn to Eskasoni, for example, or whatever the case may be. That was one of the things that we were able to facilitate because we had the connections in the non-profit sector.

The other thing that we noticed immediately was that the internet was an issue. A lot of people didn't have the internet, so they didn't have access to resources. They didn't know that things were moving online, and they were moving online very quickly, but the people who didn't have internet weren't able to get online. The places that have offered free internet like the library and the Tim Hortons and the bus, for example, that all had free wi-fi were all shut down, so they didn't have access.

[9:15 a.m.]

We started working with the Canadian Mental Health Association's Nova Scotia Division to try to provide funding and had a public call for people who needed internet and made sure that they were provided access. We're still having difficulty with that. Some areas are not covered geographically, as probably you know. I know that the government is working on making sure that those areas are kind of getting ramped up, but a lot of them were just in communities that were able to have it and just couldn't afford it. With the federal funding that we got, we were able to fund all of those up until the end of March. Those are the federal funding guidelines.

That's the other thing about United Way. We were able to be a resource for the federal government to say we want to put money in Cape Breton, how are you going to do that? It all came to us: federal money, provincial money, municipal money, and we could leverage some of that to make sure that we had more.

Through this, as well, we also had a lot of people calling up looking to volunteer, so we created an online virtual tutoring program for kids who are learning from home. We could do free internet learning that works for the folks that have internet. We're in the process of making sure that that happens.

We do hear stories of people that couldn't access their Alcoholics Anonymous meetings because they moved virtually, so now they're at risk. They're isolated and calling me asking if there's something we can do to help them. We also have social workers calling us because children have received a Chromebook, but can't use it at home because they don't have internet. Those are the kinds of things that we're trying to do to make sure that we're working together to get these folks what they need.

A large portion of our funding comes from corporate sources and you can see that in the slides that I don't have in front of me so I can't give you the exact numbers. A large portion comes from corporate, special events, and individual giving but 11 per cent comes from "other": that would be foundations, grants, and government funding that we would use. We have summer students that help us out.

Just so you know, we're only an office staff of three, so facilitating what we need to do and how we need to do it is sometimes quite challenging. We do access funding support for summer students and co-op students, and they come in and help us to facilitate. For example, it was our summer students who got the online tutoring up and running and recruited the volunteers and all of that. They then collected the information for the folks who needed the internet and then facilitated that information through the Canadian Mental Health Association with the local internet service providers, and we provided devices for free. Things like that.

Facilitating all of that requires a lot of legwork, and we were able to access some funding support for our summer students to be able to help us out with that.

I know I only have five minutes. I'm not sure where I'm at. I could keep going for hours.

THE CHAIR: You're over five minutes.

LYNNE MCCARRON: So I can stop.

THE CHAIR: Thank you very much. We'll now move on to opening comments from Ms. LaTulippe-Rochon.

JOANNA LATULIPPE-ROCHON: That was just about perfect. Thank you for that. Everybody knows me as JoAnna because of that name.

Good morning, everyone. Thank you for the opportunity to speak today to bring you a perspective on child poverty in Cape Breton.

The Family Place Resource Centre is an organization that's been up and running for about 27 years and I've been there for that full period of time. We're working with about 3,573 individuals across Cape Breton Island, and our programs and services are really very focused on trying to reach the most vulnerable of families.

There are so many things that could and should be said when one has an opportunity to come forward in a forum such as this. I thought that after a few quick statistics that most likely are familiar to you, I'd spend most of the five minutes sharing the impact of poverty

- to paint the picture, if you will, of what child poverty means for those we are working with and aware of on Cape Breton Island today.

We certainly know that children don't earn income. They live in poverty because their parents are struggling to survive given the low-income circumstances that they're experiencing. Statistically, when we look at figures from the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, we recognize that 36.6 per cent of children live in poverty within the federal riding of Sydney-Victoria and 26.9 per cent of children live impoverished lives within the Cape Breton-Canso riding. Pardon me for using the federal ridings, but they are the ones that I had the strongest statistics for.

From quite a disturbing low of 17.2 per cent of children living in poverty in our Chéticamp area to a decimating high of 73.2 per cent in Eskasoni, too many children are doing without the very, very basics that others may take for granted as we live, work, and play on our beautiful island.

Nova Scotia has the third-highest child poverty rate in Canada and the highest rate in Atlantic Canada as per the last Report Card on Child and Family Poverty.

I'm not sure, but I think perhaps we allow this situation to continue because we're not familiar with the impact of poverty on our young families, and diving into the heart of that matter is really quite uncomfortable. It's very heartbreaking. Difficult conversations, but it's really my belief that until we understand the face of poverty, until we understand it in very real terms, we may not be inspired to do what I recognize is the very difficult work to eradicate its existence.

Some examples of the work that we're involved with - I feel like it's a double-blind study now, because there were certainly identities protected before, and doubly protected now to be overly cautious and respectful of people's privacy: we're working with a rural dad whose children were removed from the care of their mother while he himself was incarcerated. Being back in our general population now, he's trying to get his home ready for his children to return as he recognizes the need for appropriate furnishings and other child-related needs. He's attempting himself to live on a single person's income assistance. He's often hungry when he comes to our programs; we recognize that what we're serving as a snack is actually a meal for him.

He's made significant progress and I'm happy to report that the ongoing plan from a child protection perspective is for the family to be reunified and for his children to come back. He's very focused on that, yet very conscious that he doesn't want to give any sort of reason, if you will, for our child welfare folks to be uncomfortable or to change their mind. So with that, he's doing without food and he's doing without oil to try to save every penny he can to purchase things that he needs for his children. This is the only way that he has found to access funds to slowly get him what his young family needs.

The sad situation is not only without lots of public transit on our island, but certainly when we hear multiple participants reporting that in fact they feel forced to perform sexual favours to pay for trips to the grocery store, or to get their children to medical appointments. When you live in rural communities, transportation issues are very limiting and they're certainly not easily resolved.

Oftentimes, and certainly this time of year, we have families dealing with rodent issues, and it gets so bad for one of our families that rats actually climbed on to counters and ate the food that was out defrosting for the family meal. When we connected with that family to discuss the issue, the landlord was not willing to send an exterminator in because the landlord had a previous bad experience in the year prior and so was not going to pay exterminators to come in, and so we stepped in to cover that cost. The exterminator reported to the family, and through the family to us, that there were several generations of rats living in that apartment building.

Her child gets so depressed with the living arrangements, he doesn't want to go to school. The child went to school and reported to a guidance counsellor that he was feeling suicidal and ended up moving out of the family home to live with a neighbour. The mother is devastated, feeling totally unable to provide care for her children.

Conscious of the time, but not trying to rush through these situations, we can talk about Jane, who's a mother of three. She's living separate from her partner and her children. She has access visits with the middle child, and she's challenged to try to understand the difficult physical and emotional road her youngest child - along with other transgender people - have to travel to become the person they always knew they were.

Jane suffers with mental health issues, which leave her unable to consistently maintain or at times even leave her very small apartment. At times, when her mental health spirals out of control, she is unable to maintain the required contact with service providers, and this results in reduced - or the elimination of - benefits that are normally accessible to her.

The family often experiences food insecurity. The loss of internet and the lack of minutes on a telephone exacerbates the situation. She's experiencing much in the way of parental stress, strife and confusion in a situation that over and over again increases her level of mental unwellness.

We can go on to other generations and talk about Denise as a grandmother. We have lots of grandparents providing primary care for grandchildren. In her situation, a number of the children are still in school. One has identified special needs. She's on a fixed income, being a senior. She's separated from a partner, living in a small rental unit, and doesn't always have access to transportation. Things like school supplies and clothing for growing children are huge challenges for her. Through our program experience with her, we learn that she often goes without food and without the very basics of things that she

would need to make more available for the children she cares for. She came to be the primary caregiver of her grandchildren after a family separation related to unaddressed addictions issues.

Joseph is a father and a primary caregiver of his two young children. Occasionally he also parents a third child who he understands to need such support. Addictions have played a part in the breakup of his partnership and continue to have an impact on the children's lives. He works full-time, but he works full-time for minimum wage, and his wages don't meet the needs of his family. He finds himself dependent on the financial help of his aging parents, support that they can little afford to give.

Food insecurity, inconsistent access to reliable transportation, and the cost of educational and recreational opportunities are just some of the poverty-related challenges that Joseph faces as he puts forward his best efforts to support his family.

Certainly recognizing that I was invited here today to specifically speak to our Cape Breton experience, but in no way do I want to diminish the experiences of children and their families from all across Nova Scotia. While this is a problem that's perhaps heightened in Cape Breton, it isn't one that stops at the Canso Causeway.

How many more children are going to be left behind before we will make it our collective priority to end child poverty? Think about things like a living wage; food security; accessible, affordable, and appropriate housing; quality child care; access to internet, telephones, and public transit; and focused supports for Indigenous communities. These are places to begin or places where we must continue our efforts if we really are focused on doing right by our youngest citizens.

Very quickly, in closing, I want to acknowledge a conversation that I had the pleasure of having with our Deputy and her colleagues to try to get to the heart of some of these matters. Thank you.

THE CHAIR: Thank you very much, Ms. LaTulippe-Rochon.

Now to Deputy Minister Taweel.

TRACEY TAWHEEL: Mr. Chair and Committee members, thank you for having us back again - it's a pleasure to see you all again - and for the invitation to speak on this complex and very important topic. I'm very pleased to be here with my colleague Joy Knight, and I'm equally pleased to be here with two really important key community partners in United Way Cape Breton and the Family Place Resource Centre.

I would like to begin by acknowledging the incredible work that these two organizations do and the important role that they play in the fabric that is required to

support both children and families living in poverty in this province. We are very thankful for the work that they do every day.

As this Committee would be aware, at the Department of Community Services we have been working to change our systems and programs to be less reactive and to place more emphasis early, before families reach a crisis point. This approach also extends to the investments we are making to interrupt the cycle of poverty so that families and their children can build the kind of lives they want for decades to come.

I think it's important to note that not every family living in poverty is on the DCS caseload. In fact, many are not. We still need to support them by building community programs that can help when and where they need it. I'm consistently impressed by both our staff's commitment to the people we serve and the number of community organizations dedicated to supporting those in poverty, particularly children. In Cape Breton, the topic of today's discussion, communities are very close-knit and that community support is particularly profound in that area.

[9:30 a.m.]

Poverty, with a focus on child poverty, is a problem too significant and too complex for government to fix on its own. We must work closely with communities and community groups across government and with families themselves. Poverty rates in Nova Scotia are at 13.3 per cent and have been slowly but steadily declining since 2008. Child poverty sits at about 24 per cent across the province. That rate goes up by nearly 10 per cent in Cape Breton.

It is a heartbreaking reality and there are no simple solutions or quick fixes. Child poverty is a complex issue. It is frequently intergenerational and systemic and is often rooted in trauma, racism, mental health issues, and addictions.

I'm here today to assure you that my department is fully committed to this work. Over the last several years, we have put measures in place to put more money directly into the hands of families who need it. This helps parents support their children now while we find ways to help them build the futures they want for themselves and their children.

This year, for example, government invested \$18 million in the Nova Scotia Child Benefit. This is the largest increase for families since the Child Benefit was created in 1998. It puts hundreds of dollars more per month in the hands of families who need it most, and more families are now eligible. For example, a family of five - two parents and three children - earning \$30,000 a year were ineligible for the benefit before the change. Now they will receive \$1,750 more per year.

In addition, with this expansion, more children are eligible for drug coverage under the Low Income Pharmacare for Children program. Through the program, families pay \$5

per prescription. This tax-free monthly benefit began in July 2020 and we estimate almost 28,000 families and 49,000 children will now be receiving the Nova Scotia Child Benefit.

We have also introduced the Standard Household Rate, which is the largest increase to the income assistance budget in Nova Scotia's history. This means everyone who receives this rate gets the maximum amount. Before this change, people had to live within specific budget amounts based on their household size and their actual costs. Now with the Standard Household Rate providing a flat rate based on household size, people choose how they allocate their money between shelter, food, and other expenses. For some who are able to find housing at a lower rate, this means more money for food or other expenses.

Child support payments are now exempt from income assistance calculations. We know that children in single-parent families - particularly those led by single mothers - are more likely to live in poverty. This one change puts an average of \$322 more per month into those parents' pockets.

Food security is also a critically important issue. Government is supporting access to healthy, nutritious food in Victoria County, Cape Breton, and in other communities through the Community Food Literacy and Access Fund. There are healthy eating programs in schools across the province. We've introduced grants for community-led anti-poverty initiatives and they are supporting projects like the African Nova Scotian Freedom School, the Boys and Girls Club, the Whitney Pier Youth Club, and the Cape Breton Regional Municipality's Transportation Innovation Lab.

Tackling poverty also requires wraparound supports for families and children that will disrupt the cycle of poverty for future generations. This means support with child care and educational funding for their parents. It may mean help with transportation costs and career supports, and recognizing cultural and systemic barriers. We believe in supporting families early before they are in crisis. This includes intensive supports for families, like our Families Plus program in New Glasgow and Cape Breton. It also includes support for the important work done by family resource centres like the Family Place Resource Centre, who know their families and their needs so well. Our Parenting Journey home visitation program works collaboratively with families to identify their challenges and how best to overcome them.

Poverty is a complex problem that requires a cross-government approach. We work closely with other departments who also offer critical supports for families. For example, the universal pre-primary program is now in place in every school across the province. Pre-primary students can take the school bus, and before- and after-school programs are offered at 34 pre-primary sites.

The new Canada-Nova Scotia Targeted Housing Benefit offers support for those struggling to afford housing: up to \$448 a month for renters and \$200 a month for homeowners. That is not included in our income assistance calculations. In the last two

years, government has increased child care subsidy rates so that kids can get quality preschool learning, and quality child care gives parents the chance to perhaps improve their education or enter the workforce.

Poverty is complex and it cannot be solved by one department alone, nor can it be addressed solely through funding. Rather it takes a focused and sustained commitment to make real change that seeks to address the root causes of poverty. We know there is a lot more work to do. We are focused on our clients' needs and making it easier for them to access our help, rather than making their needs fit into our processes, and we are focused on finding solutions for the many hard-working families in need of support.

We are also committed to working in partnerships with organizations like United Way and Family Place. We recognize that our mutual clients sometimes feel a power imbalance when thinking about interacting with our Department and with government organizations. While our staff do everything they can to build relationships with our clients, we count on our partners, who often have a different relationship with our clients than we do to bring their needs to our attention when people don't feel they can approach us directly.

These partnerships are critical, not only because of the important services these agencies provide, but also because together, we can ensure that people are receiving the right package of supports and help show them that we are indeed working together, we believe in them, and we want them to have a better future. Thank you.

THE CHAIR: Thank you. We'll now move to questions from the Committee. I'm recommending that we have questions until 11:00 a.m. allowing us a bit of time for wrap-up comments and then a little bit of Committee business. Right now I have eight folks on the list - including Ms. Coombes with three questions - so we're going to do one and a supplementary, but I'm going to try to gauge the time so that we can get everyone in if I can.

Let's start with Ms. DiCostanzo.

RAFAH DICOSTANZO: Thank you all for the information you provided so far. It's difficult sometimes to think of a child going hungry.

I do also want to ask: how do you define poverty? I come from a different country. I'm assuming the definition of poverty is national to Canada. And how does that work in other countries? Where do we stand and what is the definition of poverty here?

TRACEY TAWHEEL: Thank you very much for the question. You are correct. There is a national standard known as the Market Basket Measure. Nationally, we look to Statistics Canada to provide us with census data and income data measured against a basket of services and products, basically, that families need to purchase.

The rate of poverty varies, or the measure varies, from province to province based on the cost of living in the respective province that you're measuring the poverty rates within. From a low-income perspective, families and individuals are considered to be living in poverty if they are 50 per cent below the low income cut-off level for the particular jurisdiction within which they live.

RAFAH DICOSTANZO: Another item that I was really thinking about is the federal child tax benefits. Have you seen a big difference? To me, I know it has made a big difference to the refugee families that I worked with and the number of kids that they have. Has that made a big difference in Cape Breton as well?

TRACEY TAWHEEL: I would say yes, it has made a difference. I wish it had made a bigger difference, but I think it has had an impact. In combination with the Nova Scotia Child Benefit, we should see a bigger impact. Your question really does speak to the complexity of poverty and the circumstances within which many families in this province who are living in poverty find themselves. That very complex mix of intergenerational poverty - often there are intergenerational trauma and mental health and addictions issues. There may be systemic racism at play. There are a number of challenges that many families face.

While the Canada Child Benefit, as well as the Nova Scotia Child Benefit, are positive steps in the right direction - increasing those rates are positive steps in the right direction - research would indicate that the biggest indicator of whether or not a family or an individual will live in poverty is if their family, their parents, lived in poverty. That tells us that we need to really disrupt that cycle of poverty. The way to do that, we believe, is in working in partnership with our community partners, such as Family Place and others, to disrupt that cycle of poverty by making significant impacts through things like, for example, universal pre-primary, through making post-secondary education more accessible for families, through some of the supports that we can provide through employment support.

Quite simply - this is a very complex problem, so I don't want to sound like I'm oversimplifying this at all - sometimes for children who have not had role models, who don't believe that they can achieve more because they've not felt that they've been believed in, perhaps because of intergenerational trauma in their family, or perhaps involvement with child welfare - sometimes having someone believe in them and see what is actually possible, whether that individual works at the Family Place Resource Centre, works with United Way, or is a case worker with Community Services, can make a fundamental difference in the life of that child and put them on a path to a better future.

That's not to say that supports putting more income in the hands of families now aren't important. It is absolutely important, hence the increased investment in the Nova Scotia Child Benefit and the changes made around the Standard Household Rate, changes

made around basic personal amount from an income tax perspective. All of those changes will help, but without wraparound supports that acknowledge the complexity of the issue, we will not get at some of the root causes.

Thank you. I'll leave it there.

THE CHAIR: Thank you. Ms. Coombes.

KENDRA COOMBES: Thank you all for being here. My question is for the Department.

You've said multiple times in your answers that poverty is a complex issue. I disagree. I think it's only a complex issue because we have a government that has refused to make the multiple and concurrent necessary investments. In the most recent budget, the government prioritized a \$70 million corporate tax cut at a time when we had the lowest median tax income in Canada and the highest rate of food insecurity of any province.

The first Report Card on Child and Family Poverty in Nova Scotia was released by the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives in 2001. Since then, they have issued annual reports based on research that have all made similar recommendations, including increasing income assistance to adequate levels tied to living costs; establishing a system of universal, accessible, and affordable child care; and ensuring workers have access to fair wages.

We heard today in the presentation from the Family Place Resource Centre that what is needed is a living wage; accessible, affordable, and appropriate housing; quality child care; access to internet, telephones, and public transit; and focused supports for Indigenous communities. I will add appropriate mental health and addiction health care as well.

My question is: what was the rationale within the Department behind the decision not to address the recommendations coming out of a decade of existing research?

TRACEY TAWHEEL: There was a lot in your preamble, so I will try to go through some of your preamble and respond to your question.

I would respectfully disagree that we have not addressed those recommendations. We haven't addressed them in full. Absolutely not. I hope my remarks were very clear in that I'm not here today to try to say that these rates aren't significant and that they don't require an increased focus.

What I am here today to say is that we are working collaboratively in ways that we've not worked before, to be perfectly frank, with community and across government to look at the levers that government has, but also to take into account the strengths that

communities have in terms of working collaboratively with us. Part of the work in the \$20 million Nova Scotia Poverty Reduction Blueprint is to look at different ways to tackle this challenge that speak to some of the root causes that I spoke to earlier.

I'll try to work through some of the comments that you made. I've already referenced the Nova Scotia Child Benefit. The Nova Scotia Child Benefit represents an \$18 million increase in that benefit - the first increase since 1998, as I referenced earlier. It puts an extra minimum of \$300 in the pockets of parents who qualify for that. Now more parents qualify for that and 49,000 children will now receive the Nova Scotia Child Benefit within their family.

I referenced the Basic Personal Amount changes. Those changes were made a few years ago, increasing the Basic Personal Amount to just over \$11,000. That means fewer people now actually pay personal income tax, which has a significant impact on them. We've also exempted child support payments, which has an impact for those families, particularly single mothers, who were first of all not receiving their child maintenance payments, but also it was factored into their income assistance calculations. That has made a difference as well.

[9:45 a.m.]

We've doubled the allowable asset levels. It is now \$2,000 per individual - \$4,000 per family - which allows families to have more assets and still receive income assistance. The Poverty Reduction Credit has also doubled from \$250 to \$500 and the income threshold will increase with this current tax year to \$16,000.

We've also put in place, as I'm sure you're familiar, an earned income exemption schedule which allows our clients to keep more of the money that they earn. We're seeing very positive impacts from the earned income exemption. In Cape Breton, in fact, we see many more of our clients are now working because there is an income exemption schedule that makes sense so they can actually earn income and keep more of their income.

You would probably be familiar with some of the work that my colleagues at the Department of Municipal Affairs and Housing have rolled out as well. They are looking at housing stability and have hired more housing support workers. We now have the Canada-Nova Scotia Targeted Housing Benefit, which likewise is exempt from income assistance calculations. We also have a provincially-funded housing locator through AHANS to help bring about some stability in the housing situation, which is a very real challenge in the province, no question.

From a transportation perspective, we are working collaboratively with our colleagues in Communities, Culture and Heritage on a transportation strategy for the province, recognizing that the transportation challenges in Cape Breton are different from the transportation challenges in other parts of the province and require a different solution.

I guess the last point I'll make, which really comes back to my earlier comment about wraparound support, is that through this year's budget we also increased investment in Prevention and Early Intervention initiatives through our Child, Youth & Family Supports division. That Prevention and Early Intervention work seeks to work with families early so that we better understand what their needs are and provide them with the supports they need so that they can be on a surer footing to employment or whatever other stability and supports that family needs in order to be successful and to care for their children.

No family wants to live in poverty, and we don't want that either. We're working hard to try to alleviate poverty where it exists and prevent it from occurring in the first place through these wraparound supports.

KENDRA COOMBES: You'll have to excuse me, because I have one in two in my constituency living in poverty. This is a very important issue within my constituency and across Cape Breton, with one in three.

In your presentation, you also indicated that there is poverty reduction work happening across government, with many departments focused on supporting low-income Nova Scotian families and children. Unfortunately, we don't have an overall plan, clear goals, targets, timelines. Targets and timelines are very important when it comes to poverty elimination.

What is the concept for you to talk in terms of poverty reduction rather than looking at poverty elimination, when we know that here in Nova Scotia there's enough to go around and we could in fact eliminate the problem of poverty? Why is the Department talking in terms of just lessening it rather than eliminating it?

TRACEY TAWHEEL: I apologize if I've left you with an impression that I don't want to eliminate poverty. I want to eliminate poverty. I would suggest that all of my colleagues here today want to eliminate poverty.

The path to elimination is to reduce the rates of poverty on the road to elimination, so I'm with you 100 per cent. Please don't apologize for being passionate about this issue. Quite frankly, I think part of our challenge is that not enough people are passionate about this issue. This is a collective issue. It is not just a government issue. It is a community issue, but I would argue it's also an individual issue. Every citizen in this province has a role to play, and recognizing that seeing poverty, calling it out, recognizing that it exists is part of our challenge, in my view.

It's very easy to turn a blind eye to those families and individuals who are living in poverty and to just walk by. We can't do that. We need business involved, we need government, we need community. We need all of us involved. If I left you with an

impression that I'm only seeking to nip at the edges, that is not accurate. We are seeking to eliminate poverty.

The work that we have been doing over the last four years through the Poverty Reduction Blueprint has been looking at trying different efforts, trying different initiatives, working with different community organizations, and looking at the voice of community and families living in poverty to try to come up with other initiatives and efforts and ways we can begin to tackle poverty.

We are four years into the five-year Poverty Reduction Blueprint. The evaluation results are coming in and are basically affirming some of the challenges that we knew existed. Reliable transportation is critically important and something that we will need a strong strategy around. Ensuring that wraparound supports are available for families with very complex needs that speak to some of the intergenerational challenges that they may have experienced, that they require support to deal with - as well as some of the fundamental changes brought about by things like changes in the Nova Scotia Child Benefit and income assistance rates - the Canada Child Benefit certainly plays a role here.

We absolutely are working to eliminate poverty. We're working to reduce that number on the road to elimination. The Poverty Reduction Blueprint is showing us some very interesting potential projects that could spread province-wide. We'll have more information on the Poverty Reduction Blueprint within the next year or so as that funding comes to an end and we look to take those evaluation results and come forward with some recommendations to government.

THE CHAIR: Let's move to Mr. Craig.

STEVE CRAIG: Welcome, all of you, and thank you for the work that you are collectively and individually doing to address the issue of child poverty here in Nova Scotia. I think individually everybody has an interest in that, as you indicated, Ms. Taweel, so I'm not going to dwell on that.

Ms. McCarron, the work you do to take the funds and to distribute them throughout Cape Breton, to realize the needs and that funding and go searching for sources, is very important. I wish you continued success in that.

Ms. LaTulippe-Rochon, thank you for your decades of work in this area. I reflect on the comment you made about the individual who is coming out of incarceration. I remember back in the 1980s when my mother and my family were very involved in helping those in poverty. There was a man who was being incarcerated and his wife and four young children had no place to live. I remember Mom calling me and saying, "Can you get a truck? We have some people to help." We helped those people who were in need at that time. Individually, we all have a role to play here to do this.

I want to recognize too that organizations that are out there, especially during COVID-19, are having great difficulty. Seniors, the COVID-19 restrictions, youth - everybody is facing a challenge right now.

I'd like to turn my attention to the Department of Community Services. Individually, we can make a difference. I don't want to talk about all the social determinants and the grandiose plans and initiatives that are under way here. I want to talk about the individual caseworker, the social worker in the Department of Community Services who works with those who are vulnerable, who works with organizations to support organizations. I believe government has a role to play when community cannot step up.

We have community organizations that do not have the people they need now. They may have some money. It's easy to throw money. Money doesn't solve a problem. It's what you do with it that solves an issue.

How are your staff working with organizations and individuals - as you indicated earlier - to break the cycle of intergenerational poverty? We need to be able to get in there and do something. We can't get in there with a program if we don't have people and we don't have staff who are engaged and working with people.

That's what I'd like you to focus on in your response. How are your individual social workers, your caseworkers? How have they been impacted by COVID-19? I'm hearing that they're not out there, when we need to have people out there talking and working to help support organizations and individuals - recognizing that your workers do require supports as well. I suspect the stress in your department from time to time is quite high. It probably was pre-COVID-19, and even more so now, because they've got the heart too. They want to do the right thing to help our people.

I'd like you to address right now what has changed with COVID-19 in the ability of your social workers, your caseworkers, to get out into the field and have those meaningful discussions with the people who are impacted by poverty, especially poverty and child poverty in Cape Breton.

TRACEY TAWHEEL: I couldn't agree more that social workers and caseworkers in the Department care a lot. They do frequently carry a lot of stress. There's no question about it. They do become very personally invested in many of their cases, and they want to see families and individuals succeed, so absolutely, they carry a lot.

During COVID-19, all of the Department of Community Services offices remained open. We did not send all of our employees to work from home. We moved to a rotating vital team schedule where we constantly had staff working in the office so that if we did have clients who came to the office, there was someone on site to receive them.

Those who worked from home were set up to fully and completely work from home and moved to - this is during the first wave of COVID-19 - providing more intensive support over the phone. Normally, they would have booked an appointment, the client would come into the office, and they'd meet face to face. We moved to more phone service when it comes to some of our caseworkers on the Employment Support & Income Assistance side, certainly.

Moving to more phone service, in a strange way, actually seems to have enhanced relationships in some respects, because many of our clients - and I alluded to this in my opening remarks - are very anxious to come into a DCS office to meet with their caseworker, and understandably so. They're quite nervous about that. Being able to talk to their caseworker over the phone at a time that was convenient for them - many of our caseworkers talked to their clients into the evenings after they put their children to bed, or after they'd maybe worked a short shift earlier in the day. We met them more where they were during that period of time versus asking them to come in at a set time - one o'clock Tuesday, come in to our office. We were much more flexible in terms of how we connected with them in light of everything that COVID-19 was bringing, and the increased flexibility that working with and supporting them over the phone provided.

With regard to child welfare and child protection, our child protection social workers were out in the field. They did conduct home visits and were very active during COVID-19. They did not always work out of the office. They worked out of their homes with all the appropriate technological supports and protections, but they did still do home visits. They did go out and see their clients, and/or they moved visits to other modes of technology. For access visits, for example, for children who reside with a foster parent, some foster parents were not comfortable having other people come into their home during COVID-19, so in some instances we provided iPads to foster families so that we could do virtual visits for those children with their biological parents or a significant other family member who needed to have contact with them.

I would say that social workers went above and beyond to ensure that there was a consistency of presence there for all of those children in care, and for any families that were in crisis, continued to do the appropriate home visits while making sure that COVID-19 protocols per Public Health were absolutely respected to ensure that in no way was a social worker putting any family at risk by them entering a home, and likewise that we were not having our social worker at risk by entering a home where there may be illness in that home.

We looked at all kinds of creative options to make sure visits continued. I'll give you one example. To ensure visits happened, one of our offices actually went out and purchased pop-up tents that could be set up in a park, so that visits could still happen with appropriate social distancing outside with the air moving through the pop-up tent. I would say I'm sorry - your comment about hearing that people aren't getting out. The social workers did have a very strong presence, and we've heard very positive feedback from

many of our clients about how they did go above and beyond, and I was blown away throughout the entire - I've always been impressed. During COVID, I was doubly impressed.

As they've now returned to a more regularized routine and are back in the office and as I say back in a more regular routine, I am even more impressed with the diligence with which they are approaching their work, and their desire to ensure that there is an increased flexibility in how we work with our clients.

I guess the last point I would make is this Committee is certainly aware of the transformation efforts that have been taking place in the Department of Community Services prior to my arrival in the Department. COVID was a rapid-fire opportunity to learn about how to be flexible and how to really meet clients where they are. Some of our learnings from COVID, we are looking at how we can adapt those for our systems moving forward so that we are more flexible. There had already been changes made.

I think COVID has shone a spotlight on the fact that in order to have a really significant impact, which is what we all want, we need to continue to bring flexibility and client-focused, human-centred focus to all of our work.

THE CHAIR: We've reached the one-hour point, so I guess it's time for a break. I just want to mention to folks we've got through two and a half questions. I've got another eight people on the list, so we're going to have to do a little better with the preambles and a little bit shorter on the questions. I don't want to discourage thoughtful responses, but we've got a long list here.

Let's take a 15-minute break and we'll return at 10:17 a.m.

[10:02 a.m. The Committee recessed.]

[10:17 a.m. The Committee reconvened.]

THE CHAIR: Order, please. I'd like to call the Committee back to order. We'll go to the supplementary for Mr. Craig.

STEVE CRAIG: Ms. Taweel, thank you very much for those responses. Certainly, the transformation of the Department is something that I questioned when I first was elected. When I found it was to be client- or customer-centric, I was quite surprised because I always thought it ought to be, so that was a revelation for me.

Moving and adjusting with COVID, the reality of the way we do business is very important. I'm glad to see that the Department has done that and that it doesn't always replace that in-person touch, for sure. We all recognize that.

You'd mentioned iPads for foster parents, and in Cape Breton we know that the internet is not widely available. However, even if it is, people do not often have the devices with which to access it to communicate with your staff - or your staff, or your staff. I'm just wondering, what is the plan to promote or to facilitate those of low income in Cape Breton - especially those in child poverty - with devices so that they can access the internet?

TRACEY TAWHEEL: Again, I'm in vigorous agreement. Being able to access the internet is only one piece of the equation. People do need the technology, and beyond the technology need the skills as well to be able to make maximum use of the internet.

From a child welfare perspective, certainly any children that are in the care of the Minister, we do provide those children with iPads or the technology that they require to remain connected to their family members or friends, so we do make sure that those children receive the technology that's appropriate for the child.

From an income assistance perspective, clients who are on the DCS caseload who are enrolled in any of our post-secondary supported programming through Employment Support Services, they receive the appropriate technology to be able to participate fully in whatever post-secondary path they have chosen. We want to make sure that they complete that programming.

Another example where we do provide things like iPads would be at one point several months back, we came to this Committee to speak about the Executive Development in Global Entrepreneurship (EDGE) program, if you will recall. The participants in EDGE also receive the appropriate technology to allow them to participate in the program.

More broadly, we are working very closely with libraries across the province to increase additional access points. We know libraries are very well used by many, many people. In particular, our clients and families and others living in poverty certainly access community supports like libraries to access the internet. As I'm sure members are aware, libraries do provide technology that can be loaned, as well, in order to make sure that people can access the internet.

I think COVID has certainly demonstrated that access to the internet is becoming increasingly more important. I guess I would just close my response by saying it is a priority that within government, we are looking across departments. Certainly, the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development has provided devices to families who need them in order for their children to access schooling remotely.

More broadly, beyond even the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development as a table of deputy ministers, this is a topic of frequent discussion and of priority for us in terms of ensuring that citizens can fully participate. The whole world is moving to online and we want to make sure that we don't leave anyone behind because of

an inability to access technology and, secondarily, the skills required to use that technology to its maximum advantage.

KENDRA COOMBES: In 2017, when Feed Nova Scotia Executive Director Nick Jennery appeared before this Committee, he said that more of their funding comes from the donations from government employees than comes from actual government funding. You mentioned the need to work with other community partners.

The Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives' 2019 Report Card on Child and Family Poverty in Nova Scotia says that "Charity . . . is not a path to social and economic justice . . ." and I have to agree. These organizations can be doing great work in our communities but shouldn't have to be fundraisers. They shouldn't have to go looking for grants.

With that, for the non-profit organizations that are doing this essential work, why isn't the government at least providing them the core funding that they need for this work?

TRACEY TAWHEEL: We do provide core funding for quite a number of organizations right across the province. The organization that you've referenced, Feed Nova Scotia, has been self-sufficient from a donation perspective for a very long time.

I don't want to leave you with an impression that we don't work closely with Feed Nova Scotia. We do work very closely with Feed Nova Scotia. In fact, through COVID-19, because of some of the challenges that organization was facing, government did invest \$2.3 million in Feed Nova Scotia to ensure that they could access the food supply that they required.

Beyond that, the Committee may be interested to know that we actually sent staff to work at Feed Nova Scotia to ensure that their food distribution network was not disrupted. We had a number of our employees actually volunteer to go and work and they worked there for quite a significant period of time to keep the food moving. They did that because of how closely we work with Feed Nova Scotia. We continue to work closely with Feed Nova Scotia. That is a very long-standing, productive, and positive relationship.

KENDRA COOMBES: As I said before, the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives report on family and child poverty did state that, "Charity . . . is not a path to social and economic justice . . ." and as I said before, these organizations could be doing a lot more needed work.

Why are we relying on the charities to compensate for the failures of government? When I say failures of government, I mean where government is actually funding programs rather than relying on these charities to fund programs and organizations with regard to poverty elimination.

TRACEY TAWHEEL: As I stated in my previous response, just the Department of Community Services alone does fund a number of organizations. We provide core funding, program funding, and project funding. When you look right across government - for example, in my previous role at the Department of Communities, Culture and Heritage, you would note that a lot of organizations receive core funding through Communities, Culture and Heritage.

I can't speak to all of the core funding that's provided by all of the various government departments, but a number of organizations - many right across this province - do receive core funding.

From a donation perspective, to my earlier point, I do believe there is a role for all citizens, business, not-for-profit - there's a role in the elimination of poverty in this province for all of those organizations to play. While certainly we cannot be completely reliant on charity, I think the blend of government investment along with charitable donations, fundraisers, and the like provide for an appropriate blend to continue to sustain organizations now and into the future.

I guess I'll leave it at that, and I do really thank you for your question and want to reassure you that there are a lot of organizations that do receive core funding through - not solely Community Services - through other government departments.

THE CHAIR: Ms. Roberts.

LISA ROBERTS: My question is also for the Department. In your presentation, you mentioned the Standard Household Rate, which is a change this year. Based on information provided to our caucus by the Department, we know that 16,150 households - more than half of the caseload for Income Assistance - will be considered to be in core housing needs, spending more than 30 per cent of their income on shelter after the new Standard Household Rate comes into effect.

One hundred per cent of families in Nova Scotia who rely on government support for income live in poverty because the amount of income assistance falls far below the poverty line. I know that none of us here think that that is appropriate or acceptable.

How did the Department determine the new Standard Household Rate, given that it is not adequate or connected to the cost of living or any poverty measures?

TRACEY TAWHEEL: The Standard Household Rate, I think, needs to be looked at in a larger context along with all of the other investments that have been made in the entire portfolio of Income Assistance investments.

The Standard Household Rate represents a \$22.3-million investment on an annual basis, and I believe, as I referenced earlier, that increase to the income assistance rate

represented either a two per cent or a five per cent increase for individuals on the caseload depending on their individual circumstances.

In addition to the changes made around the Standard Household Rate, we also have the earned wage exemption for Income Assistance clients, which I've already referenced and I'm sure you're familiar with. Again, as I said earlier, that is having a significant impact.

The investment from the wage exemption perspective varies from year to year, but nets out at around \$3 million on an annual basis on average. The number continues to grow as more and more individuals join the workforce. We'll need to see what impact COVID may have had on that number, but it's a little early for us to tell.

I already referenced the exemption of child maintenance payments as well for Income Assistance clients. The largest recipient of that are single mothers on our caseload.

[10:30 a.m.]

I mentioned the Standard Household Rate already. As you would be aware, we also have a free bus pass program within the Halifax Regional Municipality area, and we are looking at other options in other parts of the province to roll out a bus pass program that won't and can't look the same way the Halifax program looks because of the infrastructure and the way the bus system works here, but we are looking at other options from a transportation perspective.

We also rolled the personal items allowance and the personal allowance rate into an Essentials Rate and increased that from \$100 to \$280, and that is for individuals who may be residing in shelters or may not own or rent on a permanent basis to help stabilize them until such time as they can move to more stable housing. All of those investments in their totality represent significant change within the system and in totality the largest investments in overhauling income assistance ever.

From a housing perspective, certainly my colleagues at Housing Nova Scotia are looking very closely at housing - again, as I'm sure you're very aware - and particularly on affordable housing. They support 2,500 households with rent supplements. An additional 500 supplements are planned, and 200 of those will be in Cape Breton. They've invested \$20.5 million, or will invest, over five years for the Integrated Action Plan to Address Homelessness. This is the single largest investment in homelessness prevention seen in this province.

You may be familiar with the Down Payment Assistance Program to try to help Nova Scotians with modest incomes to purchase their own homes, also providing low-income homeowners with more assistance so that they can stay in their own homes through

home repair and renovation programs. The Rental Residential Rehabilitation Assistance Program is also under way to improve the living conditions of lower-income tenants.

In terms of the other part of your question around how we arrived at decisions around the Standard Household Rate, we looked at a number of options - in consultation with our stakeholders and advocates - as we were considering making changes to income assistance. We landed on the Standard Household Rate to provide an albeit modest increase in the income assistance rate.

Also, I think more importantly, we have structurally changed the way income assistance works so that clients have more control over how they spend their funds. We're trying to move from a system that when it was created was more, dare I say, paternalistic, I guess - less control on the part of the client, more control held on the part of the administrator of the program.

We need to shift that so that it's a relationship, so that an individual is not just contacting Community Services solely because they are in need of income assistance. Rather, they come to us because they are in need of assistance, and we then look at which income supports we can provide, but more broadly what other things we can do to support that family or that individual to improve their quality of life.

That may mean referring them to a Careers Nova Scotia centre. It may mean making sure that they know about some of the programs that are offered through the Nova Scotia Community College or what employment supports are available to them through the Department or through other community partners.

That is the shift that we're trying to make. I have no doubt, working very closely with our stakeholders and advocates, that they will continue to push us to make sure that we do keep the client and those families at the forefront of all of the work that we are doing in the Department.

LISA ROBERTS: I appreciate that answer. I will say that I disagree with tabulating the cost of the lack of clawback of child support payments and earned income as an investment from the government. That is one way of accounting for it, but I find it disingenuous to calculate a decision to not claw back people's earned income as a government investment.

I appreciate those comments, and you did reference rent supplements. I have a great concern that as we roll out more rent supplements, lack of rent control and lack of investment in social market housing is creating a lineup for a need for a rent supplement as fast as the government can roll out rent supplements. So I'm wondering what the early evaluation results of the Poverty Reduction Blueprint are saying about the impact of a lack of social market housing, including in Cape Breton. I know New Dawn Enterprises has done some innovative work to increase social market housing - so non-profit housing stock.

But the public housing stock, I understand, has not been invested in in a long time in a significant way and because municipalities are still paying some amount towards that rather dilapidated public housing stock, they are not very willing to invest in expanding that social market stock.

What is the impact of that housing situation, including the impact in terms of families or Employment Support & Income Assistance clients actually staying in hotels, which I know is a significant issue in the HRM area? I don't know if it is in Cape Breton, as well.

TRACEY TAWHEEL: We're just starting to get some of the evaluation results in from the Nova Scotia Poverty Reduction Blueprint. I believe, as I referenced earlier, the evaluation results are showing some very promising practices.

From a challenge perspective, they are showing that issues around transportation are paramount in many parts of the province, including challenges on the outskirts of HRM where there's not public transit that routinely serves those areas. Transportation is certainly an issue. Housing is absolutely an issue in some pockets of the province and will be something that we'll need to look at and make recommendations on as we work into the last year of the Poverty Reduction Blueprint.

As well, some of the evaluation results are showing that looking at wraparound supports versus single interventions - kind of in-and-out interventions - do not have the same impact as a wraparound longer-term intervention would have, that sees - whether it's a caseworker from Community Services or involvement with a community-based organization - a long-term involvement versus coming in in a crisis and pulling back out. The evaluation results are showing that long-term engagement is what will net the most significant impact and that it needs to be relationship-based and not transaction-based, if you will.

Other things that are showing promise include adapting program and service delivery. This speaks to my earlier comment about the opportunity, if you will, that COVID-19 afforded us to change the way we deliver service, so drop-in sessions versus forcing people to have a multi-week kind of commitment, allowing people to participate as they see fit in different interventions, is helping. It's having every door be a right door - multiple access points to access supports. Whether it's about housing need or income need or education needs, having multiple doors that people can enter is showing promise as netting better and greater results.

Offering free and subsidized programs and services to individuals to help them meet their goals is certainly showing promise as well: cultivating culturally responsive partnerships with organizations so that we are not discounting the impact of systemic racism or impacts that have been the result of either gender or race over the course of sometimes multiple generations.

Hotel stays in Cape Breton are very low. Hotel stays in Halifax are only used as an option for our clients for a couple of reasons. One, if someone is coming for a medical appointment from somewhere else in the province, we will sometimes house them in a hotel because they're here for a very short period of time. To support that client, given the nature of why they've come to Halifax, we will sometimes support them for a hotel stay.

Sometimes we also will provide hotel stays for our clients who require additional support. If perhaps they can't be accommodated in a shelter arrangement - if they've reached that point, and they may not have any other housing options, we will then provide some support through partnerships with a hotel until they are stabilized and we can work with a housing support worker to find them more stable and permanent housing.

Our goal always is to have people in sustainable, long-term housing. We work with our clients very closely. Any of our clients who are in, for example, rental arrears, we work with them to come up with a plan and we'll support them in working with their landlord to try to avoid eviction, because obviously we don't want to see that happen. We want our clients to be safely and securely housed, and we work hard to try to provide that kind of support.

I'll come full circle now in terms of my reference to having a more human and relational-based system. We are trying to take a system that is very regulation-heavy and rules-based and make it more flexible, make it more adaptable to the needs of our clients. We want our caseworkers and our social workers to build relationships with those they serve so that they better understand the challenges and what the steps may be to help that individual or that family move to be in more stable housing or just more stability within their family - whatever that looks like for them.

That is a fundamental shift within the Department and that's not because employees of the Department didn't always want to work that way. Our policies, programs, and regulations were structured such that there was limited flexibility inside of those programs. It is a work in progress. It is not perfect and we have a long way to go, but we are working to make changes that acknowledge the very complex lives that many of our clients lead, to try to be a safe place where they can turn to when they are in need of assistance.

Just as a reminder as well, some of the individuals that we're talking about today, some of the families are not on the Income Assistance caseload; many are not, in fact. The vast majority of our caseload are not in fact families: they are single individuals. That doesn't mean that all those other families don't need our attention and our support. It's why we're working horizontally across government with all other departments and with our partners in community to try to bring attention to this issue and to look at what levers government has to increase the level of support that those families receive.

THE CHAIR: Just a bit of a time check here. We've got about 16 minutes. I'm not sure we're going to make it to everyone on the list here. I've got six more. We're going to move to just a single question without a supplementary if that's okay with folks, to just try to get as many questions in as we can.

Mr. Comer.

BRIAN COMER: My first question is for JoAnna. First of all, thanks for coming and thanks for all the great work that you and your organization do in Cape Breton for families that need it most. I know due to time I'm going to cut right to the chase here.

I know you're very well-versed and have a lot of knowledge in this area, especially in Cape Breton. Something I think about is the lack of ability for us to accurately evaluate childhood poverty from a Cape Breton perspective. I'd just like to hear your thoughts potentially on an all-party task force - Cape Breton MLAs, key stakeholders such as yourself and Lynne, and obviously community members - to try to create an innovative approach, I guess, and finally being able to move the needle and reduce childhood poverty in Cape Breton.

[10:45 a.m.]

JOANNA LATULIPPE-ROCHON: As I sit here and I listen to folks that I really do believe are working really hard and are very familiar with long, long lists of programs and services that are available in heartwarming kinds of ways to our families, I can't help but be saddened, I guess. It highlights for me the disconnect between perhaps lots of things that we think we are doing to make a difference, and while the list of programs and supports may be growing and while we may be making changes that we should have made 10 or 15 or 20 years ago now, probably we're still 15 years behind even when we advance a little bit.

I appreciate the question, and I think that something is obviously very needed to bridge the disconnect between what we can comfortably say we are doing and truthfully say we are doing. Yet the six particular situations - I could have brought you 60, I could have brought you 600 - these are not the six worst things that happened in the last year or in the last 27. This is commonplace, common parts to our work.

Whatever it takes, I would say we ought to be willing to look at what happens between transformative changes and legislation, and the family that's still hungry or cold. There's something very wrong, and one of the hopeful opportunities, perhaps, that the Deputy Minister and I had a chance to talk about last week was the dedicated connection between our services. Not that we don't have departmental people and great relationships, but when somebody is living in this situation and does not feel able - or when because of turnover or burnout or not enough staff or COVID, the people just aren't there, or the people are not hearing.

We need to do something because really, as I'm sitting here, I'm just really heavy with the disconnect. We can walk away and think that we have programs and services and a human relational-based system, but surely to goodness we've tried to be that all along. Is that a new thing?

I think that's not the lived experience of the families that we're working with, for whatever reason. Some of the barriers are if you have the authority to take the child into your care, this is not a system where people feel they can go forward and say, "I don't have food, I don't have a bed, I have rats." People feel that kind of honest conversation is going to result in the child being taken into care. In some instances, I really acknowledge there is more help available, but that's a very real barrier for people, and people can't access.

Having a committee for me is great if it's a committee about doing something. I'm beyond in 27 years, I guess - I don't want to admire the problem. I'm an accountant by background. I can give all kinds of numbers and statistics and those kinds of things. I just want to make a difference for our families, and some kind of an all-party committee that actually assesses and takes seriously where those disconnects happen from these great programs and services and this transformative process, and not seeing a whole lot of difference on the ground.

Albeit, I will say we are seeing some differences in some areas, but I'll tell you, there is no housing availability. Landlords know very well when any rate goes up or any standardized form, and when we start talking about people having choices about where to spend their money when they don't have enough money - there's not enough money. I don't know why or how, but there's not real choice.

If you have \$100 to spend any way you want, and you've got \$1,000 in bills, I don't think you're sleeping comfortably at night. There's just not enough money, and there is a disconnect. I absolutely enjoy as our organization, I think, one of the strongest, most positive relationships with our colleagues in the Department of Community Services, both on a provincial and a very local level. I celebrate it, but it's not working for us. We've got to do better.

THE CHAIR: Mr. Maguire.

BRENDAN MAGUIRE: Thank you for being here today. There were some comments made earlier about this isn't a complicated issue, and I would argue that it is a complicated issue. It's not as easy as just saying we're going to do this and everything's solved. I look at housing. I look around this Chamber and I would guess there are not many people who have lived in poverty in their life and actually, really experienced it.

We want to talk about housing. There are a whole host of issues around housing, including gentrification of neighbourhoods. Neighbourhoods that used to be affordable that

individuals moved into, and now we see this in HRM: Fairview, the north end of Halifax, and other areas where the prices of those places have skyrocketed. I remember when I was young, those areas used to be affordable. When I was 16 years old looking for a place to live, where you looked was Dartmouth, Fairview, Spryfield, and the north end of Halifax. Most of those areas are no longer affordable. There is a whole host of reasons why we're in the position that we're in.

It's very frustrating to me when I hear things like preventing the clawback is not working. The Department of Community Services went out and did extensive consultation. I can't speak to Cape Breton, but I can speak to HRM, where you had Tim involved from Phoenix House, you had Shelter Nova Scotia involved, you had Adsum House involved. You had all these organizations involved and on top of it, you had people who were directly impacted that came to these meetings. One of the things they talked about was the clawback.

For someone on this Committee to sit here and act like that's not a real investment - they haven't talked to anyone that's been impacted by that. As soon as that was pulled back and that wasn't taken back dollar for dollar, we had a flood of people from not just my community but people in this room whose constituents were impacted who contacted my office to talk about how this was a blessing. It was something they've asked a long, long, long time for.

We can all sit around here and pat ourselves on the back and say we're all doing a great job, but the truth of the matter is there's still poverty in Nova Scotia. There are still housing issues. There's still poverty. Anyone that goes to bed at night that has to worry about a roof over their head and anyone that goes to bed at night dealing with poverty, that's a failure on their behalf.

How do we eliminate poverty? If we had the magic bullet and we could snap our fingers, there's not a person in or outside of government who wouldn't do that. What I'm frustrated about, as somebody who's lived in poverty, who's had to cash a \$25 food cheque, who has had to live on the streets, who's had to use shelters, who's had to use food banks in the past - what I'm frustrated about is that 20 or 30 years on afterwards, we're still talking about this. We're still talking about the same issues.

I think we need an update on where we're at and why we are sitting here after Progressive Conservative, NDP, and Liberal governments - we've had every brand of government but Green, and here we are. Why do we have the levels of poverty that we have in Cape Breton? Why do we have the levels of poverty we have here in HRM?

I will acknowledge that I think we're sitting in the forefront of this in the community that I'm in. I can tell you that some of these programs that the federal government has put forward in particular, along with the provincial government, have lifted a lot of children and people out of poverty and helped give them more options. We know

of people who are now receiving thousands and thousands extra because of federal and provincial programs. We do have to give some credit for some of the stuff that's being done.

Before those programs, those individuals were coming into all of our offices probably on a weekly basis. In my office, we keep a record of who comes in and out. If we don't hear from someone, especially somebody who in the past has had a history of struggling with food security or finances, we contact them to see how they're doing. I would say a large percentage of them are doing a lot better, just from our own feedback.

It doesn't matter what anyone on this side of the aisle thinks or says, if you're talking to some of those people on the ground and they're saying these programs are helping, then they're helping. The truth is that there's more that needs to be done. Why are we still talking about this and what is the Department doing?

THE CHAIR: Ms. Taweel, I think that was a question for you. (Laughter) It might be for all Nova Scotians.

TRACEY TAWHEEL: I would agree that this is a long-standing conversation that has been had by many, many individuals who've come before me, certainly, in the seat that I currently occupy, and certainly successive governments for many, many, many years. Poverty is a long-standing issue in Nova Scotia, in Canada as well. Certainly we know that rates in Nova Scotia - as I believe I said at the outset, our current rate of poverty in Nova Scotia sits at 13.3 per cent. That does represent a decrease since 2008, where we were at about 16 per cent. But the decrease is too slow and the rate is still too high, to the points I believe you were making.

I've walked through a number of the changes that we've been making within the Department of Community Services, and I've tried to highlight some other disrupters in the system - what I would describe them as. Universal pre-primary is a disrupter in the system, but that's going to take 15 to 17 years for us to see the true impact of that.

I talked about the changes around the Basic Personal Amount from an income tax perspective. That, likewise, will have an impact. The Nova Scotia Child Benefit investments will have an impact, as will the Canada Child Benefit. All of those pieces taken together will have an impact, along with changes to the Standard Household Rate, some of the exemptions that are now in place - all of those things in combination will have an impact.

The other pieces I think that we need are aspects that I spoke about earlier. It's the wraparound support. It is long-term investments in families. It is connecting them to other services that can help them improve their personal circumstances, that can support them in raising their children.

There are some positive things that we certainly are seeing. Our new intakes from a youth perspective, youth aged 19-24 - our youth intakes are declining. That is positive. The number of dependants whose parents were on income assistance - the rate of those dependants transitioning themselves into income assistance is declining. That is very positive.

Is it declining fast enough or as fast as we would want it to? Absolutely not. But it does demonstrate that some of the interventions that we are undertaking - this work around prevention, this work around creating new, very focused programming from an employment support perspective - are working. The investments that we will now make - stepping up our investments around prevention and early intervention - will absolutely have an impact. We need to get to the point where all of those things are kind of working in unison, and we just haven't been there yet.

[11:00 a.m.]

Flipping a system like the income assistance system, like the child welfare system, so that we put more of the focus on the front end, on the preventive side, on the wraparound support side, is going to take some time. I believe we're on the right path and we have to continue on this path and continue to be innovative and creative and work collaboratively with our partners such as those that are here today, and maintain a focus, and I said this at the beginning and I will say it again: we all have to focus on this.

The fact that this Committee brought this item to be discussed today, I think, is really significant. It's very important. We have to focus here, and all Nova Scotians need to understand that if one family is living in poverty, then it impacts them too.

THE CHAIR: Thank you very much. We've basically come to the conclusion of our time for questions. My apologies to Ms. Coombes, Mr. Jessome, Mr. Horne, and Ms. DiCostanzo, who had hoped to squeeze in some questions this morning.

I'd like now to open it to our witnesses for any closing remarks. Ms. McCarron.

LYNNE MCCARRON: I just wanted to say that it is quite impressive to sit in a room with so many people who are passionate about helping to fight poverty, helping to move children and families out of poverty. As an organization that funds these not-for-profit organizations, I'd love to have the answers of where I should be investing our money that's going to have the greatest impact. I don't; I'm trying. I'm trying to collaborate and leverage the money that we raise in our community to get other government supports to make it stretch further so that we can have more of an impact.

With COVID-19, we've spent over \$600,000 in 51 communities across Cape Breton helping over 28,000 people. I have right now another \$120,000 that the federal government has given me to spend before the end of November. I have over \$300,000 in

asks. I have a board that's going to help us pick where that money goes, but is it going to go to the right place? Is it going to have the impact that we're hoping for?

I think every time you invest in something, you're hoping it's going to have a good return. That's the whole point of an investment. I think it's great that I've been invited for this conversation. I think it's great that there are people talking about it. It's certainly on the radar for what we do and how we do it. I agree that if we had a silver bullet, I'd be the first one paying for it. (Laughter)

I think the other part of it is that there are gaps, as JoAnna mentioned, and we have to maybe be more aware of what those gaps are. Things that I'm finding in the non-profit sector is their capacity to collect data. They're on the ground. The executive directors are doing the work, so they don't have time on the side of their desks to start collecting data and doing evaluations and all of those things that are required in order for us to say what's working and what's not. As the United Way, we are also helping that not-for-profit sector to figure out how to do that data collection and that evaluation to make sure that we're identifying what the gaps are.

I'll give you a quick example - I know we don't have a lot of time - but we had a program where we were offering free dental care to folks in Cape Breton. I thought it was great. Dentists and hygienists were stepping up. We had 150 names on the list and the week before, people started cancelling for free dental care.

I have a person in my office who has lived experience. Thank God for her, because I asked her what's going on. I have to know what's going on. Why is this not working? She said they're embarrassed. A lot of these people haven't been to the dentist in 10 years. They're scared that they're going to be embarrassed sitting in a chair to justify why they haven't been to the dentist in 10 years. Some of them are scared they're going to have a copay and they don't want to stand there in front of a receptionist to explain that they're actually getting this for free. It was all about confidence and insecurities.

I realized we're expecting people to run before we've taught them how to walk. We backed up our programs and started to try to do things a little differently so that they could still get the free dental care. One of the things that we were talking about - I think it stops at 14 or maybe 16 - is if we have some sort of continuum so that at 14 or 16, once a year they get to the dentist and we start paying for that so that they don't miss 10 years and they're not embarrassed. With COVID-19, it was a year for me, and I was thinking they would ask me about flossing. Those are the kinds of things that we have to think about where there are gaps in services.

I just wanted to say thank you. Like you say, I have money to spend and I can ask Corporate for more money. I just need to know where to put it. Thank you.

THE CHAIR: Thank you very much. Ms. LaTulippe-Rochon.

JOANNA LATULIPPE-ROCHON: I guess I'll go back to the comment that I just made because I feel it's such an important piece for me and my experience here. There's just a huge disconnect that I'm feeling quite heavily between what we think we're doing, what we're intending to do, and what the actual impact on the ground is being. We have a lot of families that are working really, really hard to try to do the very best that they can for themselves and for their children and coming up against significant barriers.

A topic we haven't talked about - perhaps some thought could be put into the turnover rate that's experienced within our child protection system, the fact that we most likely don't have very experienced workers at that level working with families. If that's an entry point into the work, then you're having people come in with entry-level skills to the most complex families that exist. That's a huge problem.

Also, getting at things like what are we doing around professional development? What are we doing to keep senior people on the ground? If we've got really complicated situations, then we need our most-experienced people doing the work. So while everybody is well-intentioned, we end up with things like this example that was shared with me early last week: a pregnant woman on her way to the hospital, supposed to be going to the hospital to deliver her baby, but stops from going to the hospital to connect with somebody in the Family Place Resource Centre because a child welfare worker told her that if she didn't have a change table, her baby was going to get taken into care. Now I know that's not true. I know that's not a reason to take a child into care. In fact, you can't fall off the floor; it's a great place to change the baby sometimes. But that's not what that woman needed to hear to have comfort, because she knows the authority exists to do that.

The cost of not having experienced, professionally-developed workers creates situations that are very difficult for our families to get through. Even when the services are there, the barriers are there. I'd suggest we look at how we retain senior, experienced staff in our non-profits when we can't compete with regard to wages or benefits, nobody has a pension plan really, any of those kinds of things.

I think there are other systemic things that we need to look at. I love the idea of having a systematic way to evaluate the initiatives that we put forward as government - and I say we as government because it is us. So we as government put forward initiatives, and maybe we think something - I think we have to get closer to knowing whether those pieces are working or not. I'm happy to continue the work to try to get there without, like I say, more admiration of the problem. That's really getting old.

THE CHAIR: Ms. Taweel.

TRACEY TAWHEEL: I'll be really quick in the interest of time. I know you're watching the clock. I just really want to say thank you. I'm very heartened to be here to have this conversation today, and absolutely support the perspectives of my colleagues.

There is much more we need to do. I believe that if we can continue to work together and keep a dialogue open and, most importantly, involve the voices of those that we serve, then we will see success. We will continue to chip away at these rates that we were talking about today, but most importantly make life better for Nova Scotian families who are struggling.

THE CHAIR: Thank you very much. On behalf of all the Committee, I'd like to thank the witnesses today both for giving voice to those in poverty and touching on the many complex issues that are part of the poverty equation that our province and really all of Canada are dealing with. Again, thank you, and you can leave your seats. We've got a few minutes of Committee business to wrap up.

On Committee business, we have correspondence. The Department of Community Services provided a letter with information requested from the October 16th meeting. If we're satisfied with that response, can I have agreement to post that on the Committee web page?

It is agreed. Thank you very much.

Secondly, the 2020 annual report. That draft has been circulated to committees and no comments were received. I had asked for a motion to approve the 2020 annual report for the Standing Committee on Community Services. Mr. Jessome.

BEN JESSOME: So moved.

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

The motion is carried.

The next meeting date will be December 10th from 9:00 a.m. to 11:00 a.m. The witnesses will be the Department of Community Services and Family Service of Eastern Nova Scotia, and the topic is the Families Plus program. We will also be doing the agenda-setting for the next six meetings.

Ms. DiCostanzo.

RAFAH DICOSTANZO: I just see on my paper here it says December 8th, not the 10th. Do we have something different?

THE CHAIR: I think it's December 10th. I think it was moved from the 3rd to the 10th, is my recollection. I'll just turn to the Clerk here.

THE CLERK: It's the 8th.

THE CHAIR: Thank you for catching that. December 8th then at 9:00 a.m. If there's no further business.

Mr. Comer.

BRIAN COMER: Mr. Chair, based on what I would consider expert testimony from the front line workers in Cape Breton, I would move to ask the Committee that we write a letter to the Premier requesting an all-party committee comprised of Cape Breton MLAs who will be tasked specifically with reducing childhood poverty in Cape Breton.

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

The motion is defeated.

With that, the meeting is adjourned. We'll reconvene on December 8th. Thank you very much.

[The Committee adjourned at 11:11 a.m.]