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STANDING COMMITTEE

ON

COMMUNITY SERVICES

Tuesday, June 1, 2021

Via Video Conference

Housing and COVID-19 and the Homelessness Crisis

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COMMUNITY SERVICES COMMITTEE

Hon. Leo Glavine, Chair
Rafah DiCostanzo, Vice-Chair
Hon. Ben Jessome
Hon. Gordon Wilson
Bill Horne
Steve Craig
Brian Comer
Lisa Roberts
Kendra Coombes

[Hon. Gordon Wilson was replaced by Hon. Suzanne Lohnes-Croft.]

In Attendance:

Kim Langille
Legislative Committee Clerk

Gordon Hebb
Chief Legislative Counsel

WITNESSES

Department of Infrastructure and Housing

Eiryn Devereaux, Deputy Minister

Lori Currie, CFO of Housing Nova Scotia

Lindsay Wadden, COO of Housing Nova Scotia

Ed Lake, Executive Director of Housing Authorities

Stephan Richard, Director of Stakeholder Relations and Intergovernmental Affairs

Department of Community Services

Tracey Taweel, Deputy Minister

Family Service Association of Western Nova Scotia

Art Fisher, Executive Director



HALIFAX, TUESDAY, JUNE 1, 2021

STANDING COMMITTEE ON COMMUNITY SERVICES

10:02 A.M.

CHAIR
Leo Glavine

VICE-CHAIR
Rafah DiCostanzo

THE CHAIR: I call the Standing Committee on Community Services to order. I am Leo Glavine, MLA for Kings West, and Chair of today's important meeting with the topic being Housing and COVID-19 and the Homelessness Crisis.

There are a few reminders, of course, as we continue the committee meetings virtually. Keep your microphone muted until you are called upon to speak, and I will recognize each person as they are about to speak. Indicate if you wish to speak by raising your hand outside of the time allotments, if there are other points during the meeting. Also place your phones on Silent or Vibrate, and at this time I would ask the committee members to introduce themselves, starting with the PC caucus.

[Some of the Committee members introduced themselves.]

RAFAH DICOSTANZO: Minister Glavine, your connection is not very good with the wi-fi. Maybe I should take over. I will need the notes, but I can manage it from here. I'll take over for a little bit just to make sure that your wi-fi is better, if you don't mind. We're not hearing you properly.

THE CHAIR: That's fine. Go ahead.

[10:05 a.m. Rafah DiCostanzo took over the Chair.]

THE CHAIR: All right. I don't have the notes in front of me, but I will manage it on the fly, no problem. Normally I have a list of how I start, but I'm just going to do it as per screen whom I see first, and I'll call your name to introduce yourself, starting with Ms. Roberts.

[The remaining Committee members introduced themselves]

THE CHAIR: It's going to be a little difficult because I don't have the notes in front of me. Could I take a three minute recess, Ms. Langille, just to print the information? Is that all right with the Committee? That's the only way I know how to follow. Three minutes' recess. I'm turning my video off so I can print. Thank you.

[10:08 a.m. The Committee recessed.]

[10:13 a.m. The Committee reconvened.]

THE CHAIR: I call the meeting to order. This is the Standing Committee on Community Services. First, I need to do a couple of items. We need to make sure that your microphone stays muted until I call your name. Wait until after the Chair has recognized you to unmute your mic. If I may get permission from the committee members that we will do the 20-minute cycle, starting with 20 minutes with the PC caucus, followed by 20 minutes with the NDP caucus, then the Liberal caucus. This is what we have been using virtually. It makes it a little easier to see hands up for people. We will be starting with that. I also want to remind people to make sure that your cellphones are on mute, and everyone to leave their microphones and video on for the members, for the Legislative Counsel, and for the clerk. Everyone else, for any staff, to stay on mute with your video off.

For today's agenda, we have officials from the Department of Infrastructure and Housing and the Family Service Association of Western Nova Scotia with us to discuss housing and COVID-19 and the homelessness crisis.

I will now ask the witnesses to introduce themselves, starting with Deputy Devereaux, please.

[The witnesses introduced themselves.]

THE CHAIR: Maybe the questions will come to you first, and you delegate it to other members as you see fit, if that's okay with you. Most members will address the deputy and then if you need help from the other - if you could introduce who you brought with you as well, that would be wonderful. Mr. Devereaux.

EIRYN DEVEREAUX: I was going to introduce them in the opening comments. Did you want me to start with opening comments?

[10:15 a.m.]

THE CHAIR: That would be fantastic. Please go ahead.

EIRYN DEVEREAUX: Good morning, Madam Chair, and members of the committee. Thank you for inviting us here today to speak with you on this important topic. I'll begin by introducing my colleagues from the newly created Department of Infrastructure and Housing. Joining me this morning are: Lori Currie, Chief Financial Officer; Lindsay Wadden, our Chief Operating Officer; Ed Lake, Executive Director of Housing Authorities; Stephan Richard, Director of Stakeholder Relations and Intergovernmental Affairs and an avid Habs fan who's very excited today.

Nova Scotia's housing market continues to see significant changes, pressures, and challenges. Housing prices have gone up significantly and vacancy rates remain low, and our population is growing. The situation in this province is unprecedented, but it's also not unique. This phenomenon is happening across Canada and throughout North America. We know that the pandemic has made this situation more complicated, and unfortunately we also know the impact has been hardest on vulnerable and low-income Nova Scotians.

Access to adequate and affordable housing is essential to quality of life, and it is something our department is working hard to address. When combined with the work of the Department of Community Services, we offer programs and services across the housing spectrum to support low- and moderate-income Nova Scotians. The Department of Infrastructure and Housing focuses most of our work in the middle of the housing spectrum, with social housing and affordable housing. We also work closely with our colleagues at the Department of Community Services, who focus their efforts working with the homeless population.

Across the province, we have more than 11,000 public housing units that are home to more than 18,000 Nova Scotians. The rent for these units is geared specifically to income, and we've also provided more than 3,100 rental and homeowner supplements each month, of which about one-third are portable rent supplement benefits. We invest in people and projects that create new affordable housing units and offer programs that help maintain the current stock of affordable units.

For low-income homeowners, we offer monthly support for home repairs and adaptations, and first-time buyers can receive down payment assistance. Our housing team has made significant progress over the past two years. This includes signing a 10-year bilateral agreement with CMHC, the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation. This agreement will see more than \$500 million in investments to support low-income Nova Scotians find and maintain safe and affordable housing. The federal and provincial governments will be 50-50 cost-matching this investment.

Under the National Housing Strategy, we've launched five new programs, including a Community Housing Capacity Building Program that supports and strengthens this important sector. We also have a community housing infrastructure program which helps repair and renew co-op and non-profit housing units. We have Indigenous housing that supports the renewal of off-reserve Indigenous housing, and we also have a public housing accessibility program to help convert units to make them more accessible. Finally, we introduced the Canada-Nova Scotia Targeted Housing Benefit for low-income renters and homeowners.

We've also expanded the Down Payment Assistance Program for first-time home buyers, reprofiled funding to create new affordable housing units, and we started work to pilot a public housing asset transfer to the community housing sector. In the first two years of our three-year action plan, we've invested over \$87 million to repair and renew over 12,000 affordable and public housing units. In the same time frame, we've invested over \$23 million to provide affordability support to over 3,400 households, and another \$12.5 million to build approximately 300 new affordable housing units. In addition, we supported 42 community housing organizations and set the stage for growth by investing \$1.6 million towards capacity-building activities in the community housing sector.

Let me break down a few of the specific investments. We've helped 330 first-time home buyers afford their down payment, and 95 households receive support through the Canada-Nova Scotia Targeted Housing Benefit. We've invested more than \$8 million to help the non-profit housing sector build approximately 200 new units and provided more than \$6 million to repair over 200 units.

In terms of Indigenous affordable housing, we've continued to work with the non-profit Tawaak Housing Association, and thus far, \$5.4 million has been invested to repair 53 housing units. We're also helping Tawaak build capacity, maintain affordability, and repair shelters.

Looking at the current fiscal year, much of our work will focus on the report and recommendations of the Nova Scotia Affordable Housing Commission and their call to action. Having just received the report, the government will quickly begin the review and consideration of the Commission's findings, with specific focus on the short-term actions.

As co-chair, I want to say that I'm very grateful for the time and effort these experts and housing sector leaders gave freely to help address this important issue. They have modelled the way in terms how they've collaborated to develop recommendations that are substantive, action-oriented, and timely in nature. I also want to thank the thousands of Nova Scotians who contribute their ideas, comments, and stories through our virtual workshops, focus groups, presentations, online survey, and website.

In the year ahead, our department also needs to negotiate the next three-year action plan under the National Housing Strategy and navigate the challenges in additional costs

that have come with our COVID-19 response. Our housing program will undergo an operational review, evaluation, and modernization, and we will evaluate options and identify additional demonstration or pilot opportunities to increase the long-term sustainability of our public housing portfolio and our affordable housing market.

We will continue to invest to strengthen the community housing sector, support low-income homeowners, and continue to implement the Canada-Nova Scotia Targeted Housing Benefit. In the coming year, our targets for helping homeowners include supporting 1,215 repairs and adaptations, as well as 300 first-time home buyers. We expect to invest \$3.5 million to support construction and repair of nearly 70 private-sector affordable rental units, and close to \$10 million would be invested to help non-profit and Indigenous affordable housing efforts.

In public housing, we will expect to tackle more than 400 repair and maintenance projects valued at almost \$18 million, and another \$9 million will be invested in greening and accessibility efforts.

The bottom line is that affordable housing is not something the provincial government can address alone. Engagement, collaboration, and partnerships among all levels of government, the community housing sector, and the private sector and developers are focused to bridge the affordable housing gap and to increase the supply of units into our communities, both urban and rural. We know there is more that needs to be done, and our department is committed to working with all stakeholders to improve the lives of vulnerable Nova Scotians.

This concludes my introductory remarks, and I look forward to providing feedback to any questions.

THE CHAIR: Thank you, Mr. Devereaux. Next, we will have Deputy Minister Taweel to give us her opening remarks as well.

TRACEY TAWHEEL: Madam Chair, with the technological challenges, I wonder if our community colleague from the Family Service Association - I'm not certain there was an opportunity for an introduction there. I just wouldn't want to step ahead of a community colleague who might have remarks as well.

THE CHAIR: I will ask the Clerk, but normally we have 10 minutes for opening remarks. I'll take this time - I was going to add before questions, ask the committee members if we can extend the committee meeting by 10 minutes at the end, just to make up for all the technical issues we've had.

I see Ms. Roberts has her hand up. Please go ahead.

LISA ROBERTS: I would certainly support the committee being extended for 10 minutes, but also the expected witnesses were the Department of Infrastructure and Housing and the Family Service Association of Western Nova Scotia. I think what Deputy Taweel was pointing out is that we actually haven't introduced Art Fisher, who is the Executive Director of the Family Service Association of Western Nova Scotia, who's the other primary witness for today.

THE CHAIR: I apologize for that, and I do see it right here on the agenda. I will introduce Mr. Art Fisher. He is the Executive Director of the Family Service Association of Western Nova Scotia.

Ms. Taweel, your turn to speak.

TRACEY TAWHEEL: Good morning and thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today and to take your questions.

For the past year, we've all been asked to stay close to home. That's been much easier for some of us than others. Having a place to call home is something most of us take for granted. For others, the daily struggle to find a safe, dignified place to sleep is a difficult reality.

The Department of Community Services is determined, working in partnership, to help those experiencing homelessness find appropriate housing and get the supports they need. Having a home means stability. It means you can focus on your other needs, whether it's holding down a job or obtaining the services you need to get a fresh start in life. We are determined this should be obtainable for all Nova Scotians, no matter what their circumstances are today.

DCS has also focused on long-lasting solutions to address homelessness. We need a continuum of supports, including more supportive housing. The Integrated Action Plan to Address Homelessness is guiding our work and our plans. This plan provides housing-focused solutions through additional housing support workers, diversion programs, and rapid re-housing initiatives that serve homeless individuals across the province.

To support the Plan, the Province has committed over \$20 million - the single largest investment ever made to address homelessness in our province's history. We are already seeing results. From April 1, 2020 to March 31, 2021, 952 individuals were housed across Nova Scotia, compared to 567 in all of the previous year. We know there is a lot more to do, but this is progress.

For vulnerable Nova Scotians experiencing homelessness, the solutions are not as simple as finding an available apartment. There are many who need more to succeed. That's why the Department of Community Services is actively working with community partners

to create supportive, permanent housing for those with the highest needs who might otherwise remain homeless.

Yesterday, our department announced \$6.4 million to create permanent supportive housing for up to 100 people experiencing homelessness. The Affordable Housing Association of Nova Scotia will receive \$3.5 million to support purchasing properties in the Halifax area. In addition, the Province has committed \$1.8 million per year to cover annual operational costs and on-site client services such as clinical care, peer support, addiction support, and mental health supports.

We also announced an investment of \$1.1 million to help the Portal Youth Outreach Association create three new transitional houses for young people experiencing homelessness in the Annapolis Valley. The houses are expected to be in Middleton, Kentville, and Windsor, and will provide housing and supports for 14 youth aged 16 to 21.

In addition, we recently announced \$553,000 for the Cape Breton Community Housing Association to provide supportive housing for 14 men in two locations in Sydney. This housing will help bridge the gap between homelessness and full independent living.

As we invest in supportive housing today, we also must consider innovative ideas for the future. We are providing \$100,000 in funding to four agencies in Halifax who will build a proposal for a community housing project for up to 100 women and children, to be known as the Home for Good Centre. The YWCA, Alice House, Elizabeth Fry Society of Mainland Nova Scotia, and the Marguerite Centre are working together on this plan, based on successful projects in Vancouver and Regina.

The vision is to create a community hub with a mix of housing options for women and families. It would include supported housing, affordable housing, multi-purpose spaces for community use, and office space for service providers. We are excited to see the proposal they will put together by next spring.

We recognize there will always be emergency situations that require emergency solutions. That's why during this pandemic we increased the number of beds available in emergency shelters. This month, the Province also provided an additional \$350,000 to add 15 more temporary shelter beds in partnership with the Mi'kmaw Native Friendship Centre in Halifax. The beds will be at the centre's North Park shelter location until the end of 2021. With this new funding, the shelter system will have its highest-ever capacity.

The pandemic increased demand for emergency housing. When shelter beds were in short supply or when we needed to create more space for social distancing, we moved people to hotel rooms. We recognize it's not ideal, nor is it a long-term solution, but as we work to put more permanent, affordable, and supportive housing in place, we need to be there for every Nova Scotian who needs our help.

[10:30 a.m.]

This is just the beginning. We know finding a home is life-changing. We know there is much to do and there are many Nova Scotians looking to us for solutions. We're on it. We know homelessness cannot be solved by will and good intentions alone. The measures we are taking will add up and reflect the caring, inclusive province we want to be.

THE CHAIR: Mr. Fisher, I'm sorry to have missed you in the beginning. I believe you have opening remarks. Please go ahead.

ART FISHER: Thank you for recognizing me and having me here. I'm assuming this is - I prepared for five minutes. This is the five minutes of opening remarks?

THE CHAIR: Correct.

ART FISHER: Just in terms of data, where we are now with Lunenburg-Queens and our Reaching Home federally-funded housing support program: We had posted before on social media a couple of weeks ago that we had 53 youth between the ages of 12 and 24 who were either unhoused or at imminent risk of eviction. That's up to 61 today. Also, as of yesterday we have 107 adults in the same situation.

I think we've seen lots of talk about all the inequities that COVID-19 has rendered visible. I think ultimately what COVID-19 renders visible is the huge extraction of wealth from particularly rural Nova Scotia and particularly all of our communities that are struggling. I don't think the real estate phenomenon is actually a phenomenon: I feel it's a deliberate extraction of wealth from our communities. The extraction of wealth certainly ramped up in our area over the last years as developers bought buildings and are really just interested in buying the building and securing the land and really simply interested in creating profitability for investors.

At one point in that first year, when those buildings started being bought up, one of our housing support workers came to me crying because she said, everybody I housed over the last 12 months has just been evicted. I think that it's really important to consider what the actual problems are, and also I really question what - I've gone to a lot of meetings this year where I hear success stories. I'm getting more and more frustrated by the success stories because the success stories often don't show us where the gaps are. They don't show us where our systems are failing people. What the success stories do is often make us as workers feel better.

For example, I've gone to lots of community sector success story meetings where we're supposed to feel successful because we've given \$20 gift cards to youth. We've also been sometimes warned to make sure that that youth doesn't get more than one \$20 gift card. Quite frankly, I feel there's a huge disconnect between what our department funders

are doing and what our community is experiencing. People are not going to get multiple \$20 gift cards because they're manipulative, which is often what the department thinks. People are going to get multiple \$20 gift cards because they're scrambling to survive. That's one of the issues with this.

I think it's really important to be clear about what the problems are. I think there are multiple myths that are important to look at. I think one of the myths is that the housing crisis is simply a phenomenon. It's not. It's an extraction of wealth from our communities all across North America, all across the globe.

I think we need to be very attentive to the implications of that extraction of wealth. What that's doing is it's actually taking all the resources from our rural communities that we could be using to build those communities. I think ultimately the issue is not the issue like poverty or some people living in poverty. The issue is the extraction of wealth that's creating the poverty.

Also, I think another myth is that community-based support and affordable housing actually is not profitable. I think that's a myth that permits the developer extraction of wealth to continue. For example, in our first project to create supportive affordable housing, we insulated the building at 629 King Street to pass the solar standards - that's really all we did - and put in heat pumps. That alone means that residents are paying \$45 a month in the middle of the Winter to heat their apartment. For our next project, we want to move to net zero because we think it's really important to move to net zero energy to make these projects diverse and profitable.

Another issue too that we're not dealing with is the fact that many of the rural youth agencies like I serve could benefit greatly from being linked to trades, education, and employment, and that could help them be a part of building a community-based affordable housing sector. The average age, I think, of construction workers in Nova Scotia right now is 48, and we drastically need the youth. The very youth whom on the one hand we call manipulators - on the other hand, we incredibly need those youth to help build our future.

THE CHAIR: Thank you, Mr. Fisher. We will go to question period now. It is 10:37 a.m. We will start with the PC caucus - who would like to start the questioning?

Mr. Craig, go ahead, please.

STEVE CRAIG: It's a pleasure to be here today on this extremely important topic. I do want to thank Mr. Devereaux, Ms. Taweel, and Mr. Fisher.

I'll note that Mr. Fisher was one of the authors and contributors to *Keys to a Housing Secure Future for All Nova Scotians* by the Housing for All Working Group. Some of those sentiments are reflected in his opening comments, which I take to heart. Mr. Fisher, thank you for those contributions, and thank you for being here today.

My first question will be to Mr. Fisher. You mentioned 53 youth growing to 61 and 107 adults in about the same situation. When I look at stats through the province and by names list and so on, it would indicate that number may not have been included in the stats. I hold that the numbers that are published are actually understated, and that there are many more people in need of housing, and youth and those, whether they be domestic situations or otherwise, absolutely need more guidance and need more assistance.

Mr. Fisher, I'm really interested in hearing your take on those comments and whether you think that we ought to first of all recognize that there are actually more people than those identified provincially and whatever stats are produced by AHANS - that they are understated. Also, what specifically would you like to see done to support your organization to address the need down in your area?

ART FISHER: I think all of the data is always so understated. The data that I provided to you is simply the data that our housing program locally knows. These are people whom they are currently connected with. That's all those numbers are at this point. It's terrifying and sad to think that's actually the number of people who are connected.

With the number of adults, for example, we have that broken down in terms of statistics with the adults we know. Twenty per cent of those adults are women and children leaving domestic violence. In terms of responses, I think we have a huge need to reimagine how we do things so that we can reimagine them in ways that are sustainable for rural communities and actually profitable for rural communities.

We certainly don't need shelters. We need shelter diversion. One of the things, for example, that we want to see move forward is that we have constructed a shelter diversion unit that could help up to five youth at a time and provide emergency accommodation for youth. We simply need a worker to provide the overnight security and safety for those youth. We're also trying to move forward with a 50-unit housing development as well that would provide about 30 to 35 supportive housing units.

I think it's very important. We talk so much about affordable housing. We don't talk as much about the incredible need for supported housing, and that's very important. It's been a very frustrating process to try to bring funders together to do a co-investment application for that site. For example, I've been told over and over again, we're not actually doing new builds now, you can get this funding later when the new build funding comes out. What's extremely curious about our project is I think our project is doing something which is really important for all rural communities in the province. It's neither to me a new build nor an adaptive reuse of a site. It's a brownfield renewal.

As I said in the information I sent out, often with small towns, the sites that incredibly need remediation and renewal are old industrial-commercial sites at the hearts of towns. Those sites are optimal for the supported housing that we want to do in the middle

of a community. They're optimal because people don't need transportation in order to connect with all goods and services. I get very frustrated when I see so much of our focus on greenfield development, that we keep moving out into new lands and keep developing those new lands and thus have to extend the infrastructure.

I think we're missing a great opportunity in a lot of our rural towns to actually look at the possibilities for brownscapes renewal. That's another way that we can also provide civic renewal in the hearts of our towns and create diverse projects that include residential, commercial, and civic sites. I think what we've done in some of our towns is that we've relied on developers to renew the main streets of Nova Scotia, and developers cannot renew what needs to be a civic project. That needs to be something that's done by community.

STEVE CRAIG: I'm certainly aligned with your comments. Thank you for those.

You talked about being told "no new builds." Does that also include, in the case of brownfield redevelopment - does that include those types of things? Would that be classified as a new build?

ART FISHER: What's very frustrating about the experience is that with multiple departments, it feels like what's explained to us is, these are the categories we offer you. What we're trying to say in return is, this is what our communities are asking for. Often, innovation doesn't fit within boxes. We're expected to reply to a funding box. We waited while the funding was being used for renewal of existing housing. Then I was told to wait until this winter or spring and we'd be able to apply for new builds. When I kept raising the issue of brownfield redevelopment, it seems like nobody knows where to put it, so it ends up simply getting put into a new build, which is really isn't. That's across departments. That was with Efficiency Nova Scotia as well. There is no place for that to fit.

I think for me, it's been incredibly crazy-making, actually. What's also been crazy-making about this process is that then we're waiting to apply for something which apparently is going to be called a new build, but then in the middle of the Winter we hear in the media that actually decisions have already been made. Those decisions have gone out without any of us knowing about projects, for example, by the Affordable Housing Association of Nova Scotia (AHANS) in the city.

It often feels like we're just completely invisible in rural areas, and it feels like multiple levels of government don't understand the importance of doing community-based work and having the community-based sector drive this work. I hope I've answered your question.

STEVE CRAIG: Thank you, Mr. Fisher, for those comments. I look at redevelopment, brownfield opportunities, as being something that could easily be put into a box that works.

[10:45 a.m.]

With that, I'm going to turn my time over now to Mr. Comer.

BRIAN COMER: My first question is going to be for Deputy Minister Devereaux, just in regard to the Nova Scotia Affordable Housing Commission report that was released yesterday. I believe there were 17 recommendations. Some of the higher-level points to the report include a \$25 million investment within the next 100 days. It moved along to discuss the new arms-length, independent housing entity in Nova Scotia.

I have two questions. First, why was this report done now? We've known for quite some time that housing is a significant issue across the province. Also, I'm just curious to see how this recommended 100-day timeline would be feasibly implemented, given the scope of the report.

EIRYN DEVEREAUX: I can't speak to the timing around the Commission. I think this government saw an important opportunity to reach out to the key stakeholders across the housing sector to bring together the leading experts from across the province. I think it was a very broad, comprehensive engagement over the past six months that led to 17 balanced, well-described, actionable recommendations.

Specifically, one of the foundational recommendations in that report really is similar to my colleague Mr. Fisher talking about reimagining. It's really about charting a new path and beginning with how the organization at the provincial level looks. One of the great successes in the last six months was just seeing a collaboration between the community housing sector and the private sector and various levels of government. We also had representation from the African Nova Scotian sector as well as Indigenous Nova Scotia.

It was really that group working together to find a shared vision and common goals despite some of the differences in terms of outlook on the various stakeholder groups. One of the outcomes, in terms of a new type of entity - the recommendation suggests that it would have a board of directors that would look very much like the Affordable Housing Commission, with strong representation from those key sectors and leaders from within that sector to help drive a new approach, and for that entity to be more innovative and flexible to the broad needs across the province.

BRIAN COMER: My next question revolves around supply and demand. My question would be: In the last decade in Nova Scotia, how many new affordable housing units have been built, and where do we go for the next decade? I know there's a significant discrepancy between the supply and demand across the province, especially in rural parts of the province. A lot of the units that I speak to constituents about are in pretty significant need of repair, and are in unhealthy living conditions, to be quite frank. I'm just looking at

a potential forecast based on the last 10 years, the next 10 years of - you mentioned a new direction. Where does that new direction take us?

EIRYN DEVEREAUX: I think it is important to acknowledge that there is a supply issue right now and that we have to get more units on the ground to help with that crisis. We're seeing big escalations in terms of market pricing on market, and some of that is really driven by the fact that there is a supply gap.

Over the last 10 years, I don't have the stats right in front of me, but there's been tens of thousands of affordable housing units that have been supported for repairs and adaptations, and we have to do the same and more as we look forward to the next 10 years.

In terms of supply, in the last number of years, we've certainly invested in trying to create additional supply, and we've been successful at that. I think the fact that we have a gap would suggest that we need to do more. The current circumstances over the last three or four years, we've seen significant population growth in Nova Scotia, which is a great problem to have, but it comes with those challenges. As you bring more people into the province and you see the province grow and hopefully correspondingly the economy grows, there's a big demand for housing.

It's going to be important as we chart the new path forward over the next 10 years to see continued investment. That's both public sector investment as well as private sector investment. We're not going to do this alone, just with taxpayers' money. We have to bring to the table the private sector and we have to engage the community housing sector as meaningful partners, along with various levels of government to try to make a dent in that affordable housing supply over the next 10 years.

One of the recommendations from the Commission is that if a new entity does go forward, that that entity obviously would probably want to establish a provincial housing strategy and set more tangible targets for the next 10 years and do that based upon evidence. There is a need, and we've identified that as a commission, to get better data. We have good data within the major markets, but when you get outside of those primary markets and into secondary markets, the data is not as strong, and you really need that to help define specific targets.

BRIAN COMER: My next question - I'm not sure who would take this, so anyone feel free - it's a relatively straightforward question. Has homelessness in Nova Scotia increased since COVID-19 started in March 2020? Do we know?

TRACEY TAWHEEL: It's a complex question to answer. Certainly the pandemic caused a lot of challenges for a lot of individuals, and I think as was highlighted, lower-income individuals, vulnerable Nova Scotians, certainly felt the impact of the pandemic much more significantly than other Nova Scotians.

With regard to data, in the HRM area we have the by-name list. That is the only part of the province where we have that by-name list. We have data gaps across the province and have funded point-in-time counts in other parts of the province. For example, my colleague Art - in Bridgewater, we provided \$5,000 for a point-in-time count so that we can get a much better handle on numbers from across the province.

I can say in the HRM area, we reached a high of just under 500 active individuals on the by-name list who are actively seeking supports. We are now down to 383 active individuals. Those individuals have been successfully housed, either through support that they've received through the provincial government or other resources, or they have found secured employment and found housing on their own, but by and large we have worked very closely with those individuals to provide support to help them re-establish themselves.

It's a difficult question for me to answer, to provide you with an exact number, other than a full acknowledgement that in this jurisdiction and in many others, nationally and internationally, the pandemic certainly disproportionately affected vulnerable citizens, and as a result of that and in recognition of that, there were a number of measures put in place to support particularly the homeless population, but also vulnerable Nova Scotians.

ART FISHER: I'd just like to quickly respond to your question as well, because from our perspective, what's happened is that the commodification of housing and real estate investment trusts and the unchecked growth of that has caused the crisis, and that COVID-19 has made it visible.

BRIAN COMER: The point of my question was just to identify there are significant data gaps. I know in Cape Breton there was a study done, a point-in-time study, and it's basically just people watching for people walking around the community that are homeless. I just think there needs to be a better job of data collection.

THE CHAIR: The time is up for the PC caucus. We move on now to the NDP, and we are starting with Ms. Roberts.

LISA ROBERTS: I really welcome this opportunity to talk about this important topic and to ask some questions. I have to say, if you could see my desk, you would see the overwhelm of reports and sources of data and lists of recommendations, because while the Affordable Housing Commission's report just came out yesterday, there have been multiple comprehensive reports, including some the government participated in, and one that I keep going back to, which is specific to Halifax, was the strategic plan of Housing and Homelessness Partnership that involved nine partners, but including the Nova Scotia Health Authority, including Housing Nova Scotia, including the Department of Community Services, which pointed out in 2016 that while only four per cent of the housing units in Halifax were non-market, some 20 per cent of households could not afford market rent.

There was a gap identified then, and frankly I haven't seen a lot of progress in addressing that gap. Given that we're now talking with announcements and with a new report very close to the end of this four-year term of this Liberal government, I'm going to try to dig into some of those announcements. The first question I have: The announcement this week of \$3.5 million to the Affordable Housing Association of Nova Scotia for acquisition of some properties for non-market housing units, I wonder if Mr. Devereaux perhaps could tell me if there are actually properties associated with that \$3.5 million investment.

[11:00 a.m.]

EIRYN DEVEREAUX: I don't have the project's specifics here with me, but I do have some very talented colleagues from the department who might have that information, so I'll ask if Lindsay Wadden could respond to that.

LINDSAY WADDEN: Just to clarify, Ms. Roberts, can you just specify which project you're referring to?

LISA ROBERTS: Just yesterday, I think, there was a press release that came out that included an announcement of investment both in the Valley and also with the Affordable Housing Association of Nova Scotia. Briefly, I would like to know in both cases, in fact, if there are actual properties associated with that particular commitment of doors on units.

THE CHAIR: I believe Ms. Taweel wants to speak to it as well, so it's up to you if she starts first or you start. I have no issue. Ms. Taweel, I believe, has information for that specific question.

LINDSAY WADDEN: Great. Please.

TRACEY TAWHEEL: That announcement that you're referring to came from the Department of Community Services. We're working in partnership with AHANS. The \$3.5 million in provincial funding will leverage federal funding as well in order to acquire potentially two properties in Halifax. There is one property that has been identified, and there is active work being done to identify another. AHANS is leading that work and as I indicated, the \$3.5 million provincial investment will leverage federal Reaching Home dollars as well.

LISA ROBERTS: Earlier this year, there was \$12 million of federal funding available to Nova Scotia under the Rapid Housing Initiative project stream that Nova Scotia might have accessed, but we did not access it because there weren't proposals ready to go. We heard that at the Natural Resources and Economic Development Committee meeting earlier this year. I'm glad that money is being allocated now so that we are ready to leverage more federal dollars that are potentially available.

Two questions. One is: Are you concerned in this real estate market where investment dollars are flowing in that AHANS is going to be challenged to actually identify properties and acquire them before a private investor scoops them? Maybe I'll ask Deputy Taweel about that.

TRACEY TAWHEEL: I believe AHANS is working very aggressively. They have hired or they've engaged with a real estate agent who understands the market very well, including the current conditions, and I believe the fact that they have access to the funds that are required to acquire property and can move quickly will hopefully put them in good stead to acquire a property when it comes onto the market. I can't obviously predict how quickly that can happen. I can't predict the market - if only we could - but I believe that they are in a very good position because they have access to both provincial and federal dollars and can move very quickly.

LISA ROBERTS: You may be aware that the NDP caucus put forward a proposal, and it has been echoed in the recent Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives housing report for the province, to institute a right of first refusal to facilitate non-profit, non-market acquisition of existing buildings, recognizing that for properties built after 2015, their rents are on average 50 per cent higher than older buildings. In fact, while the departments understandably talk about the number of new units or new doors, we know that there's a 30,000-household gap in affordable housing right now in Nova Scotia.

Frankly, we're not tracking loss of supply. We're not tracking supply that was previously affordable, and now, thanks to acquisition by private investors and repositioning with fresh paint and upgraded countertops, previously affordable buildings are being actually made unaffordable for those households. I'd be glad to hear any comment on that, but also specifically on the proposal of using a right of first refusal as is being used in Montreal.

THE CHAIR: Is the question for Ms. Taweel, Ms. Roberts?

LISA ROBERTS: I would also welcome Mr. Devereaux. Frankly, I think housing for modest-income households is still a housing question.

EIRYN DEVEREAUX: It's a great question, and the Affordable Housing Commission also identified that in the report that was released yesterday. It's certainly something the government is going to look at and see that as a particular strategy and if it can be of benefit. I would agree with the member - I think it's a valuable consideration to look at in terms of providing the community housing sector with right of first refusal on some properties that are potentially going to get gobbled up in the marketplace. I think we are aligned.

We'll take time over the next week or so to have a look at the CCPA's list of recommendations and to see where there are some commonalities, and I suggest there will be. There will be differences as well, with a different framing and context in terms of the two reports. But there's going to be a lot of common ground there too, and we'll want to see where those common ground items are.

In reference to that one aspect the member brought forward, the Affordable Housing Commission also recognized that and highlighted that as a potential critical success factor in their recommendation.

LISA ROBERTS: I was glad to see that the Affordable Housing Commission spoke about and affirmed that housing is a human right. Again, the NDP caucus introduced some legislation that puts some meat to what that concept, what that understanding of housing should mean in terms of government action.

However, we also hear both from that report but also from government that non-market and public investment in housing is not the answer, that the solution lies in increasing supply through private actors. I have concerns about that, especially given that there appears to be no intention to extend rent control beyond the state of emergency or February 2022.

Twenty-five million dollars for immediate action as recommended by the commission is welcome, but it pales in comparison to the government's intention to cut \$209 million from next year's budget. I wonder, Mr. Devereaux, as Deputy Minister of the Department of Infrastructure and Housing, has your department been advised about where it should look to cut spending next year?

EIRYN DEVEREAUX: We haven't. I think we've been tasked to try to address the affordable housing needs for the most vulnerable across the province, and the department is committed to doing that.

Just one comment around that investment piece - I think there's recognition even come out of the Commission or within government that the government can't tackle it alone. I don't think we're indicating that the answer to this affordable housing crisis lies with 100 per cent of the responsibility going to the private sector, but we absolutely have to leverage the financial resources of that sector to help us get to reduction in that supply gap. It's going to be a partnership between both the private sector, various levels of government, and also the community housing sector. I think that's laid out in the Commission's report and I think that's aligned with where we're thinking in terms of going forward. We do need investments from all those key stakeholder groups to help address this crisis.

LISA ROBERTS: I'll address my next question to Deputy Taweel. In the recent sitting of the Legislature, we raised concerns about the hotel bill covered by Adsum House

and also Coverdale Courtwork Society. They ensured that people who came to their doors but whom they could not house actually had roofs over their heads in the Winter - even temporary hotel ones. I understood from the Minister of Community Services that she and the department would reimburse those hotel costs. I understand for Adsum House at least it was in the range of \$55,000. Can you confirm that those expenses have been reimbursed?

TRACEY TAWHEEL: We are in ongoing conversations with both Adsum and Coverdale to cover both those costs but also to identify opportunities to continue to work together in the future.

LISA ROBERTS: It sounds like not yet.

I know also over the Winter and leading into the Winter shortly after the Affordable Housing Commission was struck, there were a number of proposals for the Province to actually invest in purchasing an older hotel or motel. We're spending a lot of money on rooms by the night right now. Maybe Deputy Taweel could say approximately how much we spent in the past budget year. There were proposals to actually invest in some already-built infrastructure given that housing projects from conception to funding proposal to doors being opened can often be six years, and six years in a person's life is an eternity when you're not housed.

Can either deputy or both deputies comment on why we haven't seen more significant investment in already-built infrastructure at this time, including the potential purchase of a hotel or motel, which could be matched with wraparound supportive services?

TRACEY TAWHEEL: What you're highlighting is exactly what yesterday's announcement was about - that's providing supports to AHANS, working in collaboration to make sure that we leverage not only provincial funds but federal funds to acquire existing properties. That's what that funding is absolutely intended to do.

I believe there was another part of your question. You asked how much we had spent last year in hotel costs. Approximately \$1.4 million was spent last year. The pandemic certainly drove up some of those costs to make sure that we were supporting the most vulnerable Nova Scotians, to ensure that shelters had the ability to safely distance the beds that they have inside their shelters.

The announcement yesterday in partnership with AHANS - I'd also highlight that the partnership with the Portal Youth in the Valley as well will seek to acquire existing properties and use those to support the Nova Scotians whom we're speaking about.

EIRYN DEVEREAUX: I'll just add to that. In addition to the investments that the Deputy Minister of Community Services just outlined that have targeted more to the homelessness and transitional housing and shelters, on our side of the equation, in terms of

affordable housing and social housing, I think we do have investments on the table. We have \$500 million identified through the National Housing Strategy. We've identified provincial investments in terms of renewal and adaptations within the current provincial budget. There's also a call to action right now. It is a recognition that, in light of the housing crisis and the gaps, we have to invest more, and we hope to see that in the coming years. We've identified some quick-start initiatives for this current fiscal year in light of where we're at with the current government and the approved existing budget. The investments - there's a variety outlined, but I do agree, I think we need more investments if we want to address that gap sooner than later.

[11:15 a.m.]

LISA ROBERTS: One thing that I was somewhat surprised and disappointed that there wasn't more discussion of in the Affordable Housing Commission report in particular was short-term rentals. The dominant discourse about housing is that it's a supply problem, but in fact, supply in the control of the private sector gets devoted to wherever the profit potential is greatest. We have seen in my constituency up to three per cent of rental units being reallocated to the short-term rental sector, short-term rental activity, not properties in people's own homes that they occupy.

Also I'm learning more about developers actually holding on to units in their own new builds as executive suites for effectively - slightly longer, maybe - short-term rentals. So not permanent housing. I guess my question to you is: As this housing crisis continues and as our tourism sector potentially rebounds, are you going to be exerting pressure within government to regulate more effectively the short-term rental sector amongst other situations that, in fact, deplete supply?

EIRYN DEVEREAUX: I'll ask our Chief Operating Officer, Lindsay Wadden, to provide a response.

LINDSAY WADDEN: What I would say is that we continue to work cross-departmentally with other departments in government to gather the data that we need to really understand the impacts of short-term rentals on housing supply and on affordability. It's something we will continue to focus on now that we have the Affordable Housing Commission regulations. It's something that we will continue to build the data so that that will inform decisions in the next action plan as well as the long-term strategy we hope to see developed.

THE CHAIR: Ms. Roberts, your time is up. We now move on to the Liberal caucus. Mr. Jessome.

HON. BEN JESSOME: Thanks, Madam Chair, and thanks for pinch-hitting on the fly there to get us going this morning.

My initial question was related to the inclusion of the private sector as an element to this conversation. I think that got some fair attention in the last round of questioning. I'll move to the relationship between in particular the provincial and municipal levels of government related to the housing report, and our intended path forward to deal with affordable housing.

What is the intended relationship between the Province and municipalities across the province as the approval bodies for developments, and perhaps if they have a planning role that would lend itself to establishing a basis for affordable housing in regions of the province? That's probably directed to Mr. Devereaux.

EIRYN DEVEREAUX: It's a great question. It's an important relationship, and it's a relationship that's always existed and I think we have to figure out ways to strengthen. The municipalities are engaged. That's unequivocal. We've had strong engagement over the last six months through the Affordable Housing Commission with municipal representation. We have two individuals sitting on the commission - one from HRM and one from CBRM - who are involved in exactly that on the development side, in development projects in those urban centres.

What we heard from municipalities is that to a certain degree, they're handcuffed with some of the existing legislation. One of the recommendations in the Commission's report does speak to enabling legislative amendments to allow municipalities to play a stronger role in influencing increased supply of affordable housing, whether it's through allowance of inclusionary zoning in their development planning or providing incentives to landlords and developers so that they will want to move their investments into those inclusionary zones to build more affordable housing units.

I think it's an important partnership. What we have heard from them is they don't want this whole strategy to be seen as the Province downloading responsibility, and I don't think that's where we're heading. This is about how we can leverage the best we can from both levels of government, as well as our community housing sector and private sector to try to address the affordability crisis that we're seeing across the province.

BEN JESSOME: I appreciate that response and would agree. I don't mean to insinuate that we pass the buck, but I do believe that there's opportunity in that collaboration.

I'll boil it down to a local issue that I think has consideration in other parts of the province. We have recently seen a great deal of development in the community of Upper Hammonds Plains. It's a heritage African Nova Scotian community. There are these kinds of settlements of the African Nova Scotian community across the province, but the ones that are closest to me are Upper Hammonds Plains and Lucasville. There's a great deal of new development that's taking place up there, and I think that there are opportunities to

empower these communities to maintain their heritage, maintain their history, and enable a type of development that buys into the feel of these communities.

Certainly, there are families that are multi-generational that still want to live - again I'll go with Upper Hammond Plains because that's the example that I know - the closest multi-generations that want to move back into the community that as they get older, they want to downsize but they don't want to leave the community. I'm wondering, as we enable this conversation about affordable housing, about sustainable development, and as we acknowledge that there are communities that need our support throughout the province like Upper Hammonds Plains, is there anything that falls into this report into our endeavours moving forward that's related to putting a racialized lens on community development?

EIRYN DEVEREAUX: In terms of Upper Hammonds Plains, I'm familiar with it. I live in the Hammonds Plains community, I'm a firefighter there. I mentioned to you earlier that I can recall heading up to the fire station in Upper Hammonds Plains, and there is certainly transformation going on in that African Nova Scotian community that's unprecedented, partly just because there's such land around that area. We're seeing that urban sprawl happen.

I think it's important for us. We speak about not only the Commission but within the department of the role that the community housing sector plays. In this case, it's a community group that has a vested interest in terms of development. I think it's important for us to engage with them and try to partner with them and see what we can do to come up with in the end in terms of opportunities for affordable housing in that area. I do agree, there's a racialized lens to that. We had great representation in terms of the engagements throughout the last six months with the Commission from various underrepresented or racialized groups. It's important in any kind of broad and comprehensive strategy going forward that we recognize there are a lot of different lenses there and we have to learn how to apply them effectively and not miss people as we go. That's the key to it all, obviously.

There's a lot of talent, I think, within our organization, so before I wrap this up maybe I will ask - Stephan Richard is with our organization and he's got a lot of experience. Just give him the opportunity to share some of his thoughts as well.

STEPHAN RICHARD: I want to thank the deputy for congratulating all the Habs fans in Nova Scotia. It was a great night.

Just to add quickly to what Deputy Devereaux has mentioned, there is in the Commission's report a recognition that a provincial housing strategy moving for . . .

THE CHAIR: We lost the voice - the sound . . .

STEPHAN RICHARD: Oh, can you hear me?

THE CHAIR: He froze. Oh dear. We can wait a few seconds. Or is that me?

KENDRA COOMBES: Madam Chair, I believe it's you.

BEN JESSOME: Yes, I think it is.

STEPHAN RICHARD: Okay, I'm going to continue.

KENDRA COOMBES: We can hear you.

STEPHAN RICHARD: Okay, great. I'm seeing head-nodding, so I'll continue.

I believe the commission recognized the importance of obviously applying that lens. That all partners - government, private sector and the community housing sector - need to support people of African descent, Indigenous groups. Also, that there needs to be a specific strategy for committees of African Nova Scotians in the Provincial Housing Strategy.

That's clearly laid out and I think Veronica Marsman, who was the member representing the African Nova Scotian communities on the Commission and is working very closely with Akoma Holdings Inc. in Dartmouth - they are looking at some projects. We had a focus group with Indigenous groups and people of African descent. The Commission did a great job at capturing those specific issues - looking at systemic barriers of racialized individuals and communities.

Moving forward, what we heard so far is that government is committed, and we've been committed for as long as I can remember to working with these communities to really address specific issues, and I see that continuing.

THE CHAIR: I just would like to notify the Committee that my computer sometimes just checks me out and brings me back in without me having to touch anything. So if that happens and if I seem frozen, it only takes three seconds or a very, very short time. So thank you and we go back to Mr. Jessome.

BEN JESSOME: I think another important part of this is not to limit the conversation to the establishment of affordable housing but, as Mr. Devereaux had alluded to and Mr. Richard alluded to, working directly with stakeholder groups, housing associations, and in some cases, like what's beginning to happen in Upper Hammonds Plains: formalized, growing community associations that want to see not only affordable housing but wealth creation that channels back into the community development. They want to be a part of those conversations on how wealth and opportunity is created within those communities.

I know there are a number of departments that have resources for community groups to support their work and maybe adding some certain expertise to a group. Does Housing and Infrastructure have something - or maybe somewhere else that I'm not aware of - that would help organizations like this one that's starting in Upper Hammonds Plains to kind of add some expertise to the ranks and work with them towards community development?

EIRYN DEVEREAUX: Yes, certainly. I think we do have resources and staff within our department that can help with capacity-building - especially if any kind of emergent community group has a housing focus or component to it - so I think that's an opportunity. I think there likely are other departments that offer supports, whether it's through Municipal Affairs or other ones - and we can certainly reach out to our colleagues in those departments.

[11:30 a.m.]

I know we do have a meeting set up with the Upper Hammonds Plains group next week and will certainly listen to not only their concerns but what some of their needs are and see where we can help them in that conversation.

Certainly, there is a conversation up there as it relates to affordable housing and housing specifically. It is an area where you're likely going to see development and growth over the years. Hammonds Plains has certainly experienced significant growth in the last decade or two, and I suspect that area is now being looked at closely as well. We certainly plan to meet with the group next week and share some ideas and see where we can help.

BEN JESSOME: Perhaps I'll look to some of my colleagues if they want to jump in here and ask some questions as well.

THE CHAIR: Ms. Lohnes-Croft.

HON. SUZANNE LOHNES-CROFT: I have a question about senior women. Many of them are single senior women who are sometimes widowed or they've been single, divorced, and whatnot. Many of them tend not to have CPP benefits. They're living on Old Age Security, and many live in big old houses. Covering their living costs becomes quite a challenge for them - either being on a waiting list to go into more affordable housing and senior housing - and also with just the maintenance and upkeep of their homes. I would like to have some response to how that is. The waiting list sometimes seems a little long for them. What are we doing to move this forward?

EIRYN DEVEREAUX: We do understand that elders and seniors are very important segments - a large portion of the individuals and households that we serve within the Department of Infrastructure and Housing, and specifically females. We do have a

number of programs that are available and targeted for that segment. I'll ask our Chief Operating Officer, Lindsay Wadden, to provide additional comments.

LINDSAY WADDEN: We do have a number of programs, as the deputy said, that are geared to supporting seniors. Through our repair and adaptation programs, we support seniors being able to stay in their homes longer by offering forgivable loans to do critical repairs. Also programming to support adaptations to the homes as people age in place for things that may make a home more accessible.

We also have a number of our rent supplements that are targeted to seniors, both portable and non-portable. That gives seniors the flexibility to choose the communities they want to live in that might be closer to health care options and transportation and even supports.

Two-thirds of our public housing portfolio is seniors' housing. We do have a wait-list, but with our rent supplements, we're actively targeting that wait-list to get individuals placed more quickly, including seniors who are waiting.

SUZANNE LOHNES-CROFT: I've had an occasion where we've had seniors from other jurisdictions - I would say other constituencies - who've had to temporarily move into Lunenburg County so that they can have housing, or they're living temporarily with somebody. But they're on a list in another constituency, because that's really where they're from. Are we making that a priority - that they get back to their communities where they're familiar and have their social connections?

LINDSAY WADDEN: We do have a public housing wait-list. We move through that wait-list in chronological order. We do have priority access categories that allow people to move to the top of the wait-list, including the need to be closer to critical health care supports.

What I would say is with our rent supplement program and the new Canada-Nova Scotia Targeted Benefit, that tool, along with our public housing units - those rent supplements help us place people more quickly, because they can use those rent supplements to live within the community housing sector and also the private sector. It's not just limiting serving those clients who are waiting through the public housing infrastructure, but broadening the number of units that they can choose from with that supplement.

SUZANNE LOHNES-CROFT: I normally deal with the Department of Infrastructure and Housing in Middleton to give us advice and direct us where to go. Would all that information be available there, or is that separate?

THE CHAIR: I see Mr. Lake as well. Would you like to go first, Ms. Wadden, or should I pass it to Mr. Lake?

LINDSAY WADDEN: I'll just respond quickly and then Ed can jump in if I've missed anything.

For our housing services programs, which are repair and adaptation programs, that's the Middleton office. For rent supplements and public housing, we have also the Western Regional Housing Authority. That's the entity that clients would reach out to, to get on the wait-list for public housing or to apply for the rent supplements I was talking about.

THE CHAIR: The time has elapsed for the Liberal caucus, but if the committee would allow Mr. Lake to add his comments, or just move on to the PC caucus?

Mr. Lake, do you have a short comment? Go ahead, please. I'll extend their time.

ED LAKE: I just want to add that I think what the member was also getting at was residency requirements, which apply between municipalities for public housing. Someone who is applying outside of where they are residing may not meet residency requirements as they are stated in the policy. However, the policy also does grant exceptions and gives boards the opportunity to waive residency requirements if it's in the best interest of the housing authority and on compassionate grounds, so there is flexibility within the system.

THE CHAIR: That finishes the first round of questioning at 20 minutes each. We will be starting the second round, and I believe it's going to be seven minutes per caucus, starting with the PC caucus. Who would like to go? Mr. Craig, go ahead.

STEVE CRAIG: Seeing as we have a little bit of a confusing start to this meeting, I hope you're aware that the PC caucus has two motions to bring forward later, so if you can make note of that so we can get those in, I'd appreciate it.

Very good discussion and very good questions and responses to a number of those. I want to go to the Rapid Housing Initiative. The Rapid Housing Initiative for non-municipal first round was to be completed by December 31st of last year. I note that the federal government has new Rapid Housing Initiative funding that's come forward.

My question has to do around capacity building in our not-for-profits, whether they be community organizations or co-operatives or housing trusts or housing societies, and how equipped they are to respond through the Rapid Housing Initiative. My take on it is they weren't able to respond because we did not build that capacity - and by we, I say the provincial government has not in the past taken steps to build the capacity in the not-for-profit sector.

My question is going to go to Mr. Fisher. In your experience, how aware were you of the Rapid Housing Initiative, and if you were aware of it, how prepared were you to step

up and take advantage of these significant federal funds that would have come through if you had completed an application by the end of 2020?

THE CHAIR: Before I ask Mr. Fisher to speak, Mr. Craig, you mentioned the motions. Have you sent them in writing? Are these sent to the Clerk in writing?

STEVE CRAIG: They have been, and that's why I bring it to your attention. Because of the confusion at the start of the meeting, you may or may not be aware of that.

THE CHAIR: Thank you so much. Mr. Fisher, go ahead, please.

ART FISHER: One of the concerns we had about the Rapid Housing Initiative was at the time, we were just finishing work on the supported and affordable housing units at 629 King Street. We had experienced so many delays with the supply chains because of COVID-19. One of the reasons that we did not apply for Rapid Housing Initiative funding at that time was that we were very concerned about having to complete a project within a time frame that we felt was unrealistic for the work we want to do, so that's a factor.

I think one of the key issues that we often see with the focus on buying existing buildings and re-adapting them - that's very important in our communities, but I keep coming back to the importance of innovative work that's going to create an affordable and supportive housing sector that actually provides sustainable community development. That work and all that it entails in terms of a net zero insulation and energy capacity - all of that work is very important if we're going to build a sustainable future. My worry is too many short-term solutions cause a lot of down-the-road burdens for the non-profits that take that work on.

STEVE CRAIG: In the remaining time, I'm going to turn this over to my colleague MLA Comer.

BRIAN COMER: My question is for the Deputy Minister of Community Services. I know that yesterday, part of the announcement was \$1.8 million for clinical care, peer support, addiction and mental health supports. I found that kind of strange, how this wasn't announced under the newly formed Office of Mental Health and Addictions, where all these health professionals work. I'm just wondering if maybe the deputy minister can clarify for me the rationale behind this.

TRACEY TAWHEEL: You are correct. There is a newly established Office of Mental Health, but that office, as I understand it, will be tasked with setting policy and standards in that area. What we announced yesterday are on-the-ground supports that will work providing that real-time support for individuals whom we will successfully transition into permanent supportive housing. So I think they're two different things.

BRIAN COMER: Just so I'm clear, so the policy and standards for mental health and addictions for the province would be put forth by one branch of government while the on-the-ground support team would be carrying out the jobs separately?

TRACEY TAWHEEL: What the \$1.8 million will do is to provide all of those wraparound supports - actual individuals who are required to meet the needs of Nova Scotians that we will help transition into this permanent supportive housing. So whatever that requirement might be, be it psychologists, be it trustees to help with money management - it could be any number of supports that are required to help individuals successfully thrive in a permanent wraparound supported housing situation. So it is to actually hire individuals and to be clear, our partner in this instance tied to the announcement yesterday - AHANS - will work with other community partners to make sure that those resources are put in place to support individuals so that they can be successful in their new living arrangement.

[11:45 a.m.]

We know it's about a lot more than simply - and I know everyone at this committee is aware of this - it's about a lot more than simply providing a place to live. It's about having all of the tools that are required to ensure success and stability. Frequently the problem is deep and complex, and we want to make sure that we're providing the supports required so if an individual successfully transitions from a precarious housing situation or from a position of homelessness, that we provide them with all the supports they need so that they can remain stable, supported, and housed over the long term.

THE CHAIR: The time has elapsed for the PC caucus. We now move on to the NDP caucus. Who would like to speak? Ms. Coombes, go ahead.

KENDRA COOMBES: My question is for Deputy Minister Taweel. How many Employment Support & Income Assistance (ESIA) clients are currently housed in hotel rooms, and what are the plans to address that, if any?

TRACEY TAWHEEL: I don't have that number right at my fingertips. I can certainly provide that to you. I would say from an income assistance perspective, if an individual is housed and we need to provide hotel accommodation for them, it would be for things like medical appointments and things like that. I believe you are referring to individuals who are transitioning from precarious housing or homelessness, so I don't have that number immediately in front of me, but I can certainly provide that to you after the committee meeting.

KENDRA COOMBES: This also is to you, Deputy Minister. In the opening comments, the minister mentioned that the department is looking to help individuals experiencing homelessness. My question is: Has the Department of Community Services looked at removing the address requirements to receive ESIA? As you know, people cannot

receive ESIA without an address, but individuals experiencing homelessness cannot obtain a real address without financial supports.

TRACEY TAWHEEL: I'm very happy to say yes, we have removed the address requirement, and we will be working in partnership with key community contacts such as Elizabeth Fry and organizations like that to ensure that not only have we lifted the address requirement, but that we also support individuals to become tied to community organizations, so it's not just that they'll be able to receive the essentials allowance through income assistance, but also to my earlier comments around all of those supports that are required, working in partnership with our community partners will make sure that individuals not only can come on to the income assistance caseload to help stabilize them and provide them with a level of income, but also that any other needs - that we are assessing what those other needs are and we're likewise providing those supports to help transition them into permanent, supported long-term housing.

KENDRA COOMBES: I have a question for Mr. Lake with regard to the housing. How long is the housing priority access list?

ED LAKE: The priority access - there isn't a list per se. There are people who have qualified for priority access, and when we use the term "list," we quite often use it in the context of where you are on the list. The people who are eligible for priority access aren't housed in any particular order other than we try and assess what their needs are, what the acuity of their housing needs is, and work with what's available and what their needs are. It's not a list per se. There are individual lists per housing authority. I don't have the information right now, but we certainly can make that available if that request is made.

KENDRA COOMBES: Just to follow up on that: There's no list per se, but is there a way that you are keeping tabs on those who have requested priority or have been deemed a priority within housing?

ED LAKE: If an applicant is given priority access status, our placement staff do everything they can. They are priority so as we are allocating units, we are looking at those people who are eligible for priority access and seeing what we can do in terms of placing people who do have that eligibility status.

THE CHAIR: Ms. Coombes, you have just under 30 seconds.

KENDRA COOMBES: I'll just leave it there then, because that's not enough time. Thank you.

THE CHAIR: Next we will move on to the next seven minutes with the Liberal caucus and Ms. Lohnes-Croft.

SUZANNE LOHNES-CROFT: Mr. Fisher, you have a new facility for Freeman House. Can you talk to me about how this came about? It seems when I look at your document - and thank you for that, it's very detailed. Just explain what's new on it. Any new services that you provide for local youths in the Lunenburg and Queens area?

ART FISHER: Just a clarification: Are you referring to the building at 629 King Street?

SUZANNE LOHNES-CROFT: Yes.

ART FISHER: What we've been wanting to do, and this also builds on my answer to previous questions, I think because of the way in which government services are traditionally siloed, it has been extremely difficult to experience support within our program context for developing these programs holistically in the community, but 629 is a product of recognizing we need to do that development.

In terms of that building, we want to link youth with a shelter diversion unit, for example. That means that youth we serve through our youth outreach program - so we have programs funded through Community Services' Prevention and Early Intervention sector, which includes men's intervention, family connections, and youth outreach. We've also added supported access to primary health care to that as well.

What's really critical for us at this point is to have the support of the department for being able to realize the top floor of that building as a shelter diversion unit for youth. Why we focused on 16 to 19 is through consultation with local department workers about where the need is. Also, why we focused on that age group is because we've had horrific experiences in the past of youth who are 16 to 19 leaving family violence and not being supported in staying in their own community.

For example, I grew up in rural Nova Scotia, so I know what it's like to be a rural youth who is struggling. We've worked together with rural youth who have left family violence, and then the only option for them would be to go to a shelter in the city while the department is investigating their case. That has caused increased risk for rural youth of human trafficking, substance abuse, and violence in urban areas.

I'm talking about rural youth who are often very bright and brilliant and could be really wonderful contributors to our community, but it's like a version of enforced migration. Historically, what we've seen is that some of our most compassionate and amazing youth have been forced to migrate instead of being able to stay in the community of their choice next to their natural supports.

What we're trying to do with the top floor is to create what also is not only socially viable, but it's incredibly financially viable. It's much more economical to support and fund a youth shelter diversion unit than it is to run a shelter. Shelters are extremely

expensive to run. This is about a fifth of the cost per year of what it would cost to run a shelter in the same area. Also, I think what's unfortunate about sheltering is sheltering becomes a way of life. Ideally, sheltering should be no more than 12 days before somebody transitions into something different in terms of supported or affordable housing. I hope that begins to answer your question.

SUZANNE LOHNES-CROFT: Yes, it's very interesting, thank you. I hope to come and make a visit in the near future. I think it would be beneficial for me and my office staff to have a better idea of the services provided there.

I'm finished. I'll pass it on to another colleague.

THE CHAIR: Mr. Glavine, did you want to ask something here? You want to try your system?

HON. LEO GLAVINE: Is it okay or no? I have no electrical problems, so . . .

THE CHAIR: Maybe we'll pass it on. We have literally one minute - 11:59 a.m., so we have three more minutes. Would Ms. Roberts like to ask a question? Go ahead.

LISA ROBERTS: I would always like to ask another question. In 2016, the Halifax Housing Needs Assessment showed that four per cent of the rental units were non-market and about 20 per cent of households could not afford market rent - and we know that has only gotten more challenging in the five years since then.

Is either department working towards a percentage of rental units that ought to be in non-market ownership and control, as we know that even units that are not rent-geared to income have remained relatively more affordable because there isn't the need to extract profit or dividends for shareholders?

EIRYN DEVEREAUX: I think it's targets negotiated through the National Housing Strategy and the subsequent three-year action plans. I think we have targets as we do capital planning in the short term looking one, two, three years out. I think the investments are going to drive more of those numbers that you speak of. I think a longer-term strategic plan for the provincial government in terms of housing should try to spell out more tangibly some of those Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) to be chased. But I think we have some targets that are - like I mentioned, we'd outlined some of the agreements that we have in place, and we'll look to further establish as we go forward.

THE CHAIR: This brings us to the right time to maybe ask each of the witnesses to give us maybe one-minute closing remarks. We can start with Ms. Taweel.

TRACEY TAWHEEL: Thank you very much to the committee members for bringing this important topic forward. We talked a lot today about vulnerable Nova Scotians in need

of support. From a DCS perspective, I just want to stress that we're committed to both responding to individuals who are in pressing need right now . . .

THE CHAIR: Sorry, Ms. Taweel. Mr. Glavine, can you go on mute? Thank you. Sorry, go ahead. I apologize.

TRACEY TAWHEEL: We're committed to responding to individuals who are in pressing need now and also to working toward providing much more support with more focus on prevention and earlier interventions to hopefully prevent families and individuals from needing these larger, more intrusive interventions. I want to thank our homelessness team for their dedication and commitment to providing supportive, respectful, and customized supports for vulnerable Nova Scotians.

[12:00 p.m.]

EIRYN DEVEREAUX: I just thank all the members of the committee today for the opportunity for myself and my colleagues to appear before you and to listen to your comments, questions, and feedback. We will certainly take away a lot of what we heard today and build upon that.

I'd be remiss not to take this opportunity to also thank, just given the timeliness of the Affordable Housing Commission report, all of those who were involved, so specifically the other 16 members of the commission. They put in an extraordinary amount of hours and dedication and it really was amazing in terms of how much they brought to the table over six months.

I think I'd also like to thank all Nova Scotians. We've had 11,000 touch down onto our website to see what was happening and we had over 2,000 Nova Scotians really provide meaningful participation, whether it was through focus groups, workshops, or online survey. We also had four subcommittees under the commission that were made up of various key stakeholders from across the province.

So I just want to thank everybody. I think that was a tremendous amount of effort that went into the recommendations and the report that was released yesterday and our gratitude to all for their participation. And finally thank all of the staff. We have incredible staff at the Department of Infrastructure and Housing and our housing authorities, and they come to work every day wanting to really serve the needs of those who are dealing with housing-related issues, and they do an incredible job. There's a lot of stress involved in that, not only in terms of the COVID pandemic but just in terms of the amazing challenges associated with trying to deliver affordable housing programs, recognizing that not everybody fits perfectly into that square box.

We do want to see how we can continue to improve. I think we're at a pivotal time where there is a great opportunity in terms of momentum around public and private consideration for how we tackle the housing issue, so I just wanted to thank all of the staff.

THE CHAIR: Last but not least, Mr. Fisher, would you like to say a few closing remarks?

ART FISHER: I would like to start by just building on what MLA Lisa Roberts said about the fact that we haven't been tracking the amount of affordable housing units that have been disappearing from our communities. To me there's a very huge cautionary tale that we should hold on to here. Those units are disappearing precisely because of the commodification of housing led by developers. I think we're potentially missing a huge opportunity to build the capacity of our community-based sector to provide supported and affordable housing that is economically, socially, and ecologically sustainable. That blended-value approach is often missing from our current recommendations.

THE CHAIR: Thank you again, Mr. Fisher, and I'd like to take this opportunity to thank all of the witnesses: Mr. Fisher and the two deputy ministers, Deputy Taweel and Deputy Devereaux, for your wonderful information today. We have learned a lot from what was shared and questions and responses, and if I could ask you to leave so that we can continue with our committee business. Thank you again for attending.

It's 12:03. For committee business, I'm going to start first with the correspondence. We have received correspondence from the Department of Transportation and Active Transit, information requested from the May 4th meeting. I'd like to ask the members if they've received it and if there are any comments. If I see none, I can move on to the next one. I should just tell you when it was received. It was sent last month - an agreement to post to the committee web page for committee practice is required. Are you in agreement to post? Just raise your hand if you're in agreement, just to make it quicker that way. Perfect. Thank you.

Okay, the second piece of correspondence was from the Department of Justice: information requested from the March 2nd meeting. Again, I'd like to ask for agreement to post to the website for committee practice. All hands? Okay. Thank you again.

Before the next meeting, I believe Mr. Craig wanted to read his motions. They were not sent to us in advance, so if you could read them slowly, please.

STEVE CRAIG: I'll move the first one and then MLA Comer could move the other one. I move that there be a special additional Standing Committee on Community Services meeting to discuss the Nova Scotia Affordable Housing Commission's report, *Charting a new course for affordable housing in Nova Scotia*.

SUZANNE LOHNES-CROFT: I just wonder why the member would not have used this time today at this meeting to discuss?

KIM LANGILLE: I was just going to say that the motion has been sent.

STEVE CRAIG: In response to the member, that wasn't the topic for today. The report was only issued yesterday. The topic for today was Housing in COVID-19 and the Homeless Crisis. The minister responsible, who received the report yesterday, said it was going to be taken under consideration, and that was also admitted to today by the Deputy Minister. The minister is going to take it to Cabinet. Once that report is done going through Cabinet, I think that the committee deserves to have a question and answer session by those who are responsible for the report as it has been pronounced since November 25th of last year as being an important document and one that will change and move the course of affordable housing in Nova Scotia.

THE CHAIR: We only have until 12:10 p.m. We only have three minutes, and we have another motion, so I'd like to put a motion to extend the meeting for another 10 minutes I guess, until 12:20 p.m. Is that okay with everybody? We're continuing until 12:20 p.m.

Ms. Roberts wanted to add a comment.

LISA ROBERTS: I would support the motion. I wonder if the member would accept a friendly amendment. The Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, under the leadership of Canada Research Chair on Housing Catherine Leviten-Reid, just issued also a very comprehensive report on housing: *Keys to a Housing Secure Future for All Nova Scotians*. I personally have been trying to process both reports. I would really welcome having Dr. Leviten-Reid and perhaps the co-chair of the Housing Commission both as witnesses and be able to hear them dialogue a little bit with each other.

Certainly, I think there are some considerations that are missing from the Housing Commission's report, which partly reflects who was missing from the Housing Commission, including tenant representatives, including the Affordable Housing Association of Nova Scotia, including significant rural voices. If the member would consider a friendly amendment, I would absolutely agree that this is a worthwhile additional committee meeting.

STEVE CRAIG: I agree that both are extremely important documents, but this is the one that's before government, the *Charting a new course for affordable housing in Nova Scotia* report. In talking with Alec Stafford and others, for the other report that you mentioned, I do know that they are going to take a comparative look and issue their publication around that as well. We can use that perhaps in the research document that might follow and be part of the meeting.

SUZANNE LOHNES-CROFT: I'd like to ask the Clerk, when is the next agenda-setting meeting for the Committee? That's normally the route that we go for putting - now we have two topics that are being asked to be discussed. To me it makes sense to send this to an agenda-setting meeting.

KIM LANGILLE: I expect the next agenda-setting will be at our September meeting, since the committee typically doesn't meet in July and August. We do have a witness for that meeting, but we would also be doing agenda-setting, I would assume.

LISA ROBERTS: Just to clarify, I was suggesting a friendly amendment to the topic, but there aren't two different requests for two different topics at the committee, and I'm glad to support the motion if the member wants to call the question.

STEVE CRAIG: Just to close, the report calls for considerable actions to be taken within 100 days, so that would take us into September. All this would be said and done if we wait until September, so I'd like to be able to ask questions way before that.

Implementation of some of these recommendations, in particular the four that they're talking about in the action items around it, are significant. I doubt if, in fact, the Legislature, for example, is going to be called back to change some of the legislation required, and that's been suggested in the report.

I do think that this committee has a legislative oversight responsibility to ask some of these questions beforehand. With that, I'll call for the question.

BEN JESSOME: Madam Chair, I'd like to request a recess.

THE CHAIR: A recess? Sure, for two minutes or three minutes? How long?

BEN JESSOME: Probably two to five minutes.

THE CHAIR: Five minute recess. Is everybody in agreement? Ms. Coombes.

KENDRA COOMBES: Madam, Chair, with that five minutes, it's going to take us to 12:20 p.m. and we'd have to extend another 10 minutes.

THE CHAIR: We are at 12:20 p.m. now, and we have extended another 10 minutes, correct? Originally, we agreed?

KENDRA COOMBES: Yes, and I'm saying that if we go for a five-minute break, the PCs have another motion coming, so we'd need to do another extension of time.

THE CHAIR: All right. We're just going to have to take a recess for the five minutes, and then we'll decide on the next extension when we get back. We'll be back at 12:18 p.m. after the recess.

[12:13 p.m. The committee recessed.]

[12:18 The committee reconvened.]

THE CHAIR: I call the meeting back to order. I see the hand of Ms. Lohnes-Croft. Go ahead, Ms. Lohnes-Croft. You're on mute.

SUZANNE LOHNES-CROFT: Yes. I see Mr. Horne isn't on yet, so . . .

THE CHAIR: Just his video. Mr. Horne? Can you hear me? Yes, he is. Perfect.

SUZANNE LOHNES-CROFT: Okay, great. We will agree to a meeting but it would have to be late July or August, when the report is probably, most likely brought in, with a note that this is an exception to the rule of an extra meeting and that's understood by the member who made the motion.

STEVE CRAIG: It's an exception in what context?

SUZANNE LOHNES-CROFT: For an extra meeting.

STEVE CRAIG: Okay, but the motion is not out of order, to ask for one.

SUZANNE LOHNES-CROFT: No. But . . .

STEVE CRAIG: Okay.

SUZANNE LOHNES-CROFT: . . .with the understanding that this is an exception, to have an extra meeting because of the timeliness of the 100 days.

STEVE CRAIG: Oh, absolutely.

THE CHAIR: Okay. All in agreement with the motion? Sorry, Ms. Langille, do I need to call a vote on the motion right now? Is that what I should do?

KIM LANGILLE: It sounds like that's an amendment MLA Lohnes-Croft indicated, so perhaps if they could agree to the amendment and then vote on the original motion. If that's what Mr. Hebb agrees with.

GORDON HEBB: Yes, the amendment has to either be agreed on unanimously or made as a motion.

THE CHAIR: So the amendment from Ms. Lohnes-Croft, if you can just repeat it.

SUZANNE LOHNES-CROFT: Is it agreed without a motion?

GORDON HEBB: Agreed.

SUZANNE LOHNES-CROFT: Is it agreed without a motion? Yes? It's agreed without a motion. So now we can vote on the motion.

THE CHAIR. Okay. I'm so sorry. I apologize.

Is it agreed? It is agreed. Okay, we have unanimous agreement, I believe. Thank you.

Next motion - it was Mr. Comer, correct?

BRIAN COMER: Yes, thank you, Madam Chair. I think based on what we heard today, how COVID-19 has impacted the inequities with the Province in regard to housing, my motion is to move to ask the department to compile data on how many people will be at risk of addiction once the pandemic is over so we can better prepare for the steps that need to be taken in order to properly house these individuals.

THE CHAIR: Any comments? I'm sorry. I also need to extend it another ten minutes, I guess, from before or - it depends on how long this is going to take us.

I will suggest that we will go maximum to 12:30 p.m. We do have other meetings, so if everybody's in agreement, the maximum for today's meeting will be 12:30 p.m., and that extends it for another eight minutes from now.

Is it agreed? It is agreed.

Any comments on the second motion? Ms. Roberts.

LISA ROBERTS: Certainly, given that there's no indication from government that there will be an extension or introduction of a more rigorous form of rent control after February 2022, it seems like a very worthwhile motion.

THE CHAIR: Mr. Jessome.

BEN JESSOME: Just for clarity's sake, how does the committee define "at risk of eviction" once the pandemic is over. The virus is never going away, so what are we talking about here?

BRIAN COMER: I guess my chief point to make here would be that the number of people in need of affordable housing pre-March 2020 would be significantly less than as we sit here today. As the epidemiology becomes more reasonable and Nova Scotia opens up, I think the number will be significantly higher for those requiring housing than it was pre-COVID.

THE CHAIR: Ms. Coombes.

KENDRA COOMBES: I think this motion is quite worthwhile. As for how do we define “at risk of eviction,” regardless of COVID-19, anyone at risk of eviction and homeless - I think it’s a very worthwhile time of this committee. To question what we mean by it, I think it almost in a way is devoid of the issue. The issue is people at risk of losing housing who are going to be evicted, regardless of the pandemic or not. That is something we should look at as a committee and not have to do measurements of its importance.

THE CHAIR: Mr. Jessome, go ahead.

BEN JESSOME: With respect, my intention is not to dismiss the issue, but frankly families across Nova Scotia run into unforeseen circumstances that may be completely unforeseen, and I just wonder how we’re going to measure. It’s not questioning the integrity of the intent of the issue, but rather how we measure that. I think we all agree that is important, so I’m trying to establish what the measurement is, not intending to dismiss the issue.

THE CHAIR: Any further comments? Mr. Craig.

STEVE CRAIG: Not having a definition at this committee level, I think, is not relevant. I think that the government ought to know what “at risk of eviction” means, and if they don’t have a definition of that, they should come back and tell us that they don’t, or they should come back with defining that and some numbers.

SUZANNE LOHNES-CROFT: Mr. Comer, who will compile this number? Who is to do the work behind this? What department, what agency?

BRIAN COMER: Based on the testimony today from the Deputy Minister of Community Services, there are significant gaps in their data collection for homelessness, especially primarily relying on point-in-time studies. My whole point is these studies are insufficient methods of data collection, so they would have to figure out how to do it within the Department of Community Services.

THE CHAIR: Just because we’re running out of time again, and honestly we are not extending, maybe we can bring this second motion at the next meeting or just vote on it. It doesn’t seem clear to me at all what the intention is here or how do we do. If I may ask, we can vote on it for now. Let’s vote on the motion.

All those in favour? Contrary minded? Thank you.

The motion is defeated.

Our next meeting, as per my notes, is September 7, 2021 at 10:00 a.m. However, according to what we just discussed in motion number one, this may change. We will wait for our Clerk to send us the new meeting as things progress.

This meeting is now concluded. I thank everybody for the three extensions that we did. Thank you so much.

[12:28 p.m. The Committee adjourned.]