HANSARD

NOVA SCOTIA HOUSE OF ASSEMBLY

STANDING COMMITTEE

ON

COMMUNITY SERVICES

Tuesday, June 7, 2022

Committee Room

Early Childhood Intervention to Provide Supports for Families Who Have Children with Disabilities

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COMMUNITY SERVICES COMMITTEE

Melissa Sheehy-Richard (Chair)
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Danielle Barkhouse
Tom Taggart
Nolan Young
Fred Tilley
Lorelei Nicoll
Kendra Coombes
Suzy Hansen

[Kendra Coombes was replaced by Susan Leblanc.]

In Attendance:

Kim Langille
Legislative Committee Clerk

Gordon Hebb
Chief Legislative Counsel

WITNESSES

Department of Community Services
Tracey Taweel - Deputy Minister
Maria Medioli - Executive Director, Disability Support Program

East Preston Family Resource Centre
Trina Fraser - Executive Director
Moashella Shortte - Lead Faculty, Africentric Cohort, Early Childhood Education Accelerated Diploma Program, NSCC (Former Executive Director, East Preston Day Care and Family Resource Centre)

HALIFAX, TUESDAY, JUNE 7, 2022

STANDING COMMITTEE ON COMMUNITY SERVICES

10:00 A.M.

CHAIR
Melissa Sheehy-Richard

VICE CHAIR
John White

THE CHAIR: Order. I'd like to call the Standing Committee on Community Services to order. My name is Melissa Sheehy-Richard. I'm the MLA for Hants West, and I will be chairing the committee today.

I just want to do a couple of reminders. There has been a change. Masks are no longer mandatory, so you can wear them. They are highly recommended, but the choice is for you to decide. Also, a reminder to please put your phones and any other electronic devices that you might have on silent.

I would ask to begin with the introduction of committee members. I will start with MLA White to my left.

[The committee members introduced themselves.]

THE CHAIR: On today's agenda, we have officials here with us from the Department of Community Services, as well as the East Preston Family Resource Centre, to discuss today's topic, which is Early Childhood Intervention to Provide Supports for Families Who Have Children with Disabilities. I'd like to welcome the witnesses here this morning and ask that we have them introduce themselves as well. We can begin with Deputy Minister Taweel.

[The witnesses introduced themselves.]

THE CHAIR: At this time, I'd like to invite the witnesses to begin and make their opening remarks, and we can begin that with Deputy Minister Taweel.

TRACEY TAWEEL: Thank you very much for inviting me here today to discuss supports and services for children living with disabilities and their families. Joining me today, as she's already introduced herself, is Maria Medioli, Executive Director of the Department of Community Services' Disability Support Program.

I believe it's fair to say that each of us here today shares the same goal. We all want our communities to be places where everyone has the opportunity to reach their full potential. We want a province with no limitations, a place where Nova Scotians can work, live, and contribute to their communities without barriers. It is our overall goal at the Department of Community Services to help build a province where everyone has equal opportunity to fully participate in society and to succeed on their terms.

Our Disability Support Program is committed to supporting the well-being of people living with disabilities and providing opportunities for growth, whether that's community living, volunteering, or skill-building for future employment. We are also aware that safe, supported, and healthy children and families are key to building a province that is strong, diverse, and inclusive.

We know that the emotional, social, and physical development of children has a direct impact on their psychological and physical health and on the adult they will become. We want to give children the best possible opportunities to find success, and our aim is to move to a system that focuses more on early intervention. This involves strengthening children, youth, and families, and helping to build their resilience. The focus is on promoting safe, stable, and nurturing relationships and environments for children and their families through services and supports that address their holistic needs.

The Disability Support Program is a key area where we are working to ensure that more children, youth, and families can access supports in order to help meet their needs earlier. Historically, the Disability Support Program has not had a rounded suite of services that directly support children and young people.

I'm so pleased that, as was announced in the most recent budget, over the next three years the Disability Support Program will both expand services and create new programming revolving around supports for young people. This year, we will take a number of actions including, among other things, starting to develop a Disability Support Program children and youth policy and implementing day programs for young people across the province. Also, in the coming years, we will build specialized teams to provide supports and services to families in their own homes, develop new small options homes, and create new pilot programs to focus on positive parenting transition planning and positive parenting generally.

In the last budget, government also announced $3.5 million more for the Direct Family Support for Children program. This is a respite-based program that supports children with disabilities to successfully live at home. Funding provided helps with respite care and special needs, including medical equipment, personal care supplies, prescriptions, and transportation to appointments. This investment will increase support for families. We estimate that up to 160 additional families will be eligible to apply.

It is our overall goal at DCS to help build a province where everyone has an equal opportunity to fully participate in society and to succeed. We know that partnerships are essential in delivering the best possible programs and services to DSP participants. We have many partners, like the East Preston Family Resource Centre, here with us today; volunteers; community organizations; non-profits; and service providers who work tirelessly on behalf of our participants across the province. I would like to thank them for their invaluable support.

Through this work, we are taking concrete steps to ensure that children and youth living with disabilities and their families receive services and supports that will honour their unique strengths and needs, and better prepare them for the years ahead.

THE CHAIR: Thank you, Deputy Minister Taweel. At this time, I would like to invite Ms. Fraser to say a few words.

TRINA FRASER: Good morning. My name is Trina Fraser, and I am the executive director of the East Preston Day Care and Family Resource Centre.

I must share with you today that, as I was told I would be given an opportunity to speak in front of this committee, I tried to think of every excuse that would get me out of it. I told myself over and over, I am not able to speak. Normally I stand in front of people full of tears as I talk about things that mean so much to me. But I decided I must use this opportunity to help others hear my voice.

Please know that I do not speak for all, but I do speak from my heart - a heart that has been supported greatly over the years by my family and my community, and a heart that sees the value in giving everyone an opportunity, no matter the skill or ability, to take on a task, no matter how big or how small.

I have been in the field of early childhood education for 22 years and I have witnessed many changes and challenges over the years. I have to say, today truly gives me hope that our government is on the right path to ensuring that our society gets what it needs to help support the many children and families that we work with.

I have been blessed to have been born into a family - a village - of support. As the African proverb says, “It takes a village to raise a child.” I gleam with pride as I know that my village is one that truly supports its children and families. How do we get every village to work with a sense of understanding the importance of giving value to all people?

At our family resource centre, we support many families with children with disabilities, which involves the entire centre helping and pooling resources in an effort to normalize their experience and treat every child the way we would expect our own children and grandchildren to be treated.

A lot of the time, when a family has a child with disabilities, the focus is always on the child, and sometimes we forget that the families still have their own issues, such as food security, child care, having an affordable place to live, and domestic violence situations. Currently, when we have families come in who need supports, we are pulling together from other programs to help with staffing and minding the children while the parents have emotional and difficult conversations with our amazing staff. The stronger we can become as an organization the more we can support families who need it most. By hiring trained ECEs or early intervention staff at family resource centres, we would be able to eliminate the addressed stress currently on staff to help with child care while providing one-on-one services.

There’s a story here that I want to share. We currently had a young person on the autism spectrum attending our after-school youth program. His mother was skeptical at first about sending him to the program. She shared that her fear was that others would make fun. She was pleased with the support she and her son received from the centre staff and shared that she wishes she’d have known sooner that our family resource centre was so welcoming.

This is just one of the many stories that we could share that would allow many others to see the understanding that there is so much value in allowing communities to care, to help, support, and walk with families - sometimes at the most difficult times in life. Knowing that our staff are accepting of all people with no judgment helps us make a better society, even if it’s just one step at a time. Being able to walk with families as they walk through the doors of the East Preston Day Care and Family Resource Centre, it allows us to build a community of care.

We thank you for allowing us to speak today and we look forward to our continued work with our community.

THE CHAIR: We will start with opening the floor for the first round of questions. That happens in a format of 20-20-20. I will open the floor to somebody from the Liberal caucus - MLA Tilley.

FRED TILLEY: Thank you to all of you for coming today to participate in this committee and provide valuable feedback around children and early intervention with disabilities. I appreciate all the work that you all do, and great to see NSCC supported. I'm a former NSCC principal, and I know first-hand the level of training that ECEs are receiving in that facility. Thanks to you for what you do.

I guess my first question - and it could be for any one of you - is around the unique challenges that families with children with disabilities face when it comes to identifying, especially around early intervention. Can you talk about when it first becomes identified, and the challenges you have in getting that plan in place?

TRINA FRASER: The uniqueness about our centre - we get to meet children at early ages. They may start at our daycare at three months, and they'll continue on to 10 years, but through that time while they're at our centre, we're able to interact with them, interact with the families. Our staff are trained that if there are supports we see that are needed for that family, we can approach families - most times in a gentle way - in helping them to understand and realize that there are resources and programs. Then, we're able to partner with other organizations to bring folks in to give those supports directly at our daycare and within our family resource centre.

TRACEY TAWEEL: Just to build on Ms. Fraser's comments, I would say, as well, if we think about the complexity of all of the programs and services that parents have to navigate, it's not just having a new child at home. There's a whole labyrinth of programs and services that families have to navigate. Organizations like Ms. Fraser's really provide a very important, on-the-ground support in a very warm and welcoming way.

Certainly, as we look to roll out a full array of child and youth programming for children with disabilities, one of the elements that we'll be looking at is intense family support which essentially provides wraparound support for families. As Ms. Fraser said in her opening remarks, we can't just look at the needs of the child - we have to look at the whole family. Prior to this point, we have not had program offerings that looked holistically. When a family has a child with a disability, they need other levels of supports. It's incumbent upon us working with our partners to wrap around them and make sure that they have what they need at the earliest possible point in time, and that we look at supports for the other children in the home, supports for the family as a unit, so that we can keep that family together and as strong as possible.

FRED TILLEY: Thank you both for those great answers. It's so important, and something that you had said, Ms. Fraser, in your story about your student with autism and the concern of the family with regard to bullying or making fun - those types of things.

Are there programs that are being put together to work with the children who may not have a disability, to help them understand and to be more inclusive with their day-to-day activities?

[10:15 a.m.]

TRINA FRASER: I think it's so important to know that when I'm on the outside looking in at our centre, I know that the staff are well versed and well trained in the sense of understanding when there may be bullying. They know how to address it. They know how to bring in speakers who can talk and help support the community as a whole in helping those children understand the importance of accepting one another.

FRED TILLEY: That's great, because I think early intervention at that level is very important as well.

This question is for the deputy minister. I was very happy to see that we're going to focus more on early interventions going forward, and I think that's very important. I understand that it can't be just one department that looks at this, because there are so many, like the Department of Health and Wellness and the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development. All of these departments have to work together to put plans together.

I think the early intervention stages is where it's going to help the child for the future. Can you just talk a little bit about the communication between departments around early intervention and how that would work?

TRACEY TAWEEL: Certainly over the course of many years, the Department of Community Services - at the corporate level, if you will, at the program level, and also at the local level - has worked very collaboratively with their colleagues in the Nova Scotia Health Authority, the Department of Health and Wellness, and Education and Early Childhood Development with any number of supports, and now the Office of Addictions and Mental Health as well.

The lines of communication are always open, and as we work with families and identify what their needs may be - if the family has involvement with Community Services, part of the role of the care coordinators is to connect the family to the myriad of supports that exist so that other departments and agencies can deliver them, to be seamless for the family.

As I referenced earlier, navigating through the labyrinth of all the available programs and services can be really challenging when maybe you have other children at home. You want to provide the best possible support for the child that we may be focused on. It's incumbent upon us, and through some of our new programming, we will step that up even further so that the wraparound for that family helps them connect to services and supports that are available at the local level.

In addition to that connection with other departments and agencies, just to go back to a point that Ms. Fraser made about the importance of community, I think we can't overemphasize that enough. Having community wrap around families is really important. I've mentioned at appearances before that having involvement with the Department of Community Services - no matter how positive that experience may be - brings with it a different level of perhaps anxiety for some families. Connecting with an organization like Ms. Fraser's removes that, because it is warm and welcoming, and it is of community. The more we can support program delivery at the community level, the more success I believe we will see. That's certainly where we're moving toward.

FRED TILLEY: My last question, and then I'll pass it over to my colleague.

I think it's great that we're looking at those wraparound supports to the family, to help the family understand. As an MLA, one of the biggest things that I hear about is trying to navigate. My child - whatever the issue might be, where do I start? Where do I go?

I'm just wondering if you could elaborate a little bit on some of the ideas around family supports that we're thinking about.

TRACEY TAWEEL: There are a number of new programs that we will be rolling out over the next one to three years. I'll run through a few of them. I'm sure the rest will come up throughout the course of our discussion here this morning.

One element that we will be rolling out is agency-delivered respite. That will help families - that will connect families directly with departmental-approved respite providers. Right now, families need to find respite providers, train them, ensure that they're comfortable providing the supports that are required. We want to try to remove some of that by connecting families directly with preapproved respite providers. It can be really challenging. We certainly saw that during the pandemic. It can be very challenging for families to find respite providers who can provide the care and support that their family and their child require. We want to make that a simpler and more streamlined process.

We're also looking at more fully developing outreach supports, which will involve bringing multidisciplinary teams into families' homes versus always having families need to take their children out to receive services. Rather, the teams - different supports - will be able to come into the home.

We are also developing a new assessment tool for children and youth, and exploring the removal of the IQ requirement, which is a requirement right now as part of our programming.

Intense family support - I referenced that a bit earlier. That involves wraparound supports for a family. It's very intense programming that looks at the family in its entirety and not only considers the supports that the child with the disability may need, but what supports the other children in the family might need. What supports do the parents require, the partners in the home? So it really looks at wrapping around that entire family.

Lastly, as part of our expansion, we'll also be piloting three new programs. The ones I've referenced, we will be rolling those out. We will also pilot three new ones.

First, a transition-planning pilot, which will support families helping their children through those critical transition periods. Anyone who has children knows the challenge of helping navigate through, say, puberty or when you go from grade school to junior high or junior high to high school or high school to university or college. Those are significant transition periods for any family and for any child. We're looking at the development of a pilot that will help families with disabled children navigate those transitions.

We're also developing a crisis-planning pilot, which will work with families to have a plan in place in case a crisis does befall that family. I think many of us know that having a plan in place, whatever it's for, can bring a sense of comfort. Right now, families living with children with disabilities and wanting to support them as best as possible often live in fear of what will happen "if." This program will allow us to work very intensively with families to answer that question. So if X happens, here are the steps that we can take together to navigate through that.

Finally, we'll be piloting a positive parenting programming that will put peer supports in place for parents and provide other parenting supports. Parents who have children with disabilities want exactly what we all want: they want the absolute best for their children, they just may need additional support to help navigate a bit of the unknown. Our plans with these pilot programs are to help them navigate that and provide those supports.

In closing, I guess the last comment I would make is that all of the programs that we're rolling out are as a direct result of very intensive pilots that we ran in 2019 and 2020. These were designed with parents who have children with disabilities, and the new pilot programs that we're rolling out are in direct response to what those parents said: you know what, here are the other gaps, here's what we really need.

THE CHAIR: I think now we'll call on MLA Nicoll.

LORELEI NICOLL: Thank you for the presentation. Like I said, Trina, it's always nice to see you. We've met on many paths, and I thank you. I can't imagine life in the Prestons without you and the East Preston Family Resource Centre, so thank you for all that you do - and thank you, deputy minister, for yours.

I'll springboard off what my colleague said and thank you for that information that was along the same vein that I was going with regard to the work and the complexities of navigating. I know that Trina can certainly attest to how difficult that can be within the many departments at the Province and the needs for the whole family.

With every plan, I look at sustainability because in my position, I receive a lot of calls from residents whose children have turned of a certain age and then they seem to be abandoned at that time. I know we're talking about children, but the disabilities do not go away as they become 16.

I just wondered as you mentioned the pilot project that you're doing in transitioning and identifying the gaps - to me, that is a gap currently right now, especially with regard to autism. I hear a lot from parents of adult autism patients that don't know what to do, and it's kind of like society says, well, they're an adult now, and they just leave them to their own devices. I just wondered in that regard, how are you transitioning children into adulthood so that the efforts made are lifelong?

TRACEY TAWEEL: It's a great question. Certainly, the Disability Support Program has a suite of programs that are available for adults. Part of the transition-planning pilot will be to ensure that that transition is as seamless as it can possibly be so that we don't have experiences such as you've described where individuals find themselves transitioning out of their family with a lack of then-available support. If the individual continues to qualify for programming through the Disability Support Program, they can transition into the adult programming. They also would be potentially eligible for some of our Income Assistance programming as well.

I will reference that depending on the level of need of the individual, we have uncapped our Independent Living Support program which will essentially clear our wait-list of individuals who have fairly low needs who can live successfully in community. We have individuals on our waiting list now who could be living in community much more independently, and we have been unable to support them because we've had a cap on the program.

The removal of that cap over the next two years will allow us to essentially clear the wait-list. There may be individuals on the wait-list who perhaps are living in a small option home, but they could be living independently. This will essentially clear the log jam, if you will, in our entire system because it's going to allow that movement that we have so desperately needed. That in turn - to respond specifically to your question - is going to allow us to provide better support, to make sure when people transition out of their family unit, they still have the support that they require, and that family still continues to receive the support that they may need in the long run.

THE CHAIR: MLA Nicoll, you have about a minute, and then I'll have to call order.

LORELEI NICOLL: I'm going to combine my two questions. How is the housing crisis impacting the ability to obtain accessible housing for those families who have children with disabilities? Do you have that data? Is the Department of Community Services working with the Department of Municipal Affairs and Housing - as you mentioned the whole navigating within - to ensure a portion of new housing stock that's supposedly coming in, and the affordable bills are earmarked to be accessible?

[10:30 a.m.]

TRACEY TAWEEL: We work very collaboratively with the Department of Municipal Affairs and Housing. Certainly, there is a housing issue in this province, absolutely, and families with children with disabilities certainly would be experiencing the same. I can't give you any specific statistics on that, but we do work with families. If they identify housing need, we will wrap around them and help them identify where there may be available housing and help them navigate that system, and provide the supports that they need.

THE CHAIR: Very good. We will move on to the NDP caucus, starting with MLA Hansen. The time will end at 10:51 a.m.

SUZY HANSEN: We certainly appreciate the amazing work that the family resource centres do in our communities. The government really relies on their non-profit community organizations, especially like yours, at the East Preston Family Resource Centre, to provide support to families.

I think that we can make sense, since there are ways that these organizations are well-positioned to support people and families who have been made vulnerable, but I do have concerns about whether these organizations are adequately funded for this essential work. My question is for Ms. Fraser. What percentage of your funding comes from the Department of Community Services, and how much time must your board and staff members commit to funding applications and fundraising efforts?

TRINA FRASER: I have to say that the bulk of our funding does come from the Department of Community Services. Over the years, we've seen great supports provided to us by the department to help enhance and allow our programs to grow.

I remember years ago when it was just one staff at the centre. We now have a staff of seven employees at our family resource centre, so that in itself speaks volumes for the amount of supports that we've received over the years. There are other funders that provide funding to our programs which allows it to be a full circle of supports. One staff over here who's funded by way of another program can help support staff over there.

Recently, there was an increase given to family resource centres to help support hiring of more staffing, having more materials and resources available to us, so I have to say that the support has been fantastic.

SUZY HANSEN: What could government do to help your organization be stronger and reach more people? I'm just wondering the time consumption to be able to put in the effort to apply for the funding, or if that's just an ongoing thing that is happening all the time without having to apply every time.

TRINA FRASER: There are processes, and there are reports that we fill out yearly. We're able to collect data throughout the year so that we can report accurately the number of families that we serve. The biggest thing that I promote often is advertising and allowing our community and society know that there is great value in family resource centres. There are people who work within those centres who have experienced situations themselves. There are staff presently who have been participants in the past, and family resource programs have allowed them to grow in their skills, to share their abilities.

SUZY HANSEN: We know that one in four children in Nova Scotia live in poverty, and children in poverty live in families in poverty. We know that the cost of everything has gone up: rent, groceries, and it's a lot more expensive. I'd like to ask Ms. Fraser: How has the rising cost of living been impacting families in your work?

TRINA FRASER: One thing I can say, and this speaks for all non-profits - and I'm speaking from the heart. We have been a group of organizations that's been able to work strategically, and we're very resourceful. We've experienced struggles ourselves as employees, but we've been able to gain knowledge and understanding of what could happen to help a family do better.

Again, going back to the different funders and the programs that are able to be provided, we're able to offer cooking classes. We're able to offer meals for those families to take away with them when they leave the centre so that it helps alleviate some of the stresses they may have for the week. Even at times, if it's one or two meals, that's one or two meals that they don't have to worry about.

I will share that we have seen the impact of the rising cost of food. My staff are so resourceful and able to find ways and means to help create something that doesn't cost a whole lot of money and to help our community understand the importance and the value of eating healthy and being healthy. All of our programs together have allowed us to encompass every need, in a sense.

SUZY HANSEN: I noticed that the East Preston Family Resource Centre offers prenatal programs. Nova Scotia became the only Atlantic province without a universal prenatal program when it was cut by the Liberals in 2019. I know about that because I have children.

My question is for Ms. Fraser: What benefits do those prenatal programs have for your families that you work with?

TRINA FRASER: Moashella can probably help me a bit with this one, but I'd just like to say that our prenatal program has been in operation since 1993. We have been supported wonderfully by government to be able to provide pre- and post-natal services to our community.

I think the most important value of what we offer is that the programs that we offer are culturally specific to the families we work with. I think that is very important across the province, that we provide services that are there for everyone, so nobody feels left behind, in a sense.

THE CHAIR: Ms. Shortte.

MOASHELLA SHORTTE: Before being at NSCC, I was the executive director out at East Preston - part of the reason why I'm here - and I can testify to the importance of that particular program in our community.

When I think back to all the other questions that have been asked, one of the things that makes our program so successful and so important is that element of trust that's often lacking in particular in our Black communities from any service provider. Whether it is advice or services that are being offered, and it comes from a space that you know and you trust that provider, it is better received, well received. Our pre- and post-natal program is definitely a testament to that as well.

We've seen students who have gone through our day care and through our program, come back, because they already know what we offer. They come back with a sense of comfort in knowing that what's going to be delivered there is going to be well considering of their needs and how they will best receive that.

SUZY HANSEN: Ms. Taweel, do you think that prenatal programs are an important part of early intervention support? I know the answer, but I'm asking it anyway.

TRACEY TAWEEL: Absolutely. Prenatal supports are critically important, but it can't just be prenatal support. Obviously, we need a full continuum of supports that help families be the best they can possibly be.

SUZY HANSEN: In order to receive support for respite care through the Direct Family Support for Children and Enhanced Family Support for Children programs, families have to apply and meet certain criteria. I'd like to ask the deputy minister a few questions about this process. How many families are currently accessing these programs, and how many apply but are not eligible?

TRACEY TAWEEL: There are about 690 families accessing the program now. There are a number of factors that impact eligibility. Family income is looked at - at present and about to change, the income threshold is for a family of four. Any income over $84,000 would not qualify the individual for the program - we are increasing that to just under

$96,000, and we will be indexing that as well. We estimate that an additional 160 families will now be eligible once we change that.

We're working through that criteria now and how we will roll that out. We haven't rolled it out yet because we're putting all the policies and things in place that we need. We'll look at how we could maybe cover some components retroactively back to April 1st when the new criteria were put into place.

The other reasons that a family might not qualify or might not be able to access the program could be if their child in fact doesn't have a disability. There is documentation required that families must provide, so when a family approaches the department, they work with a care coordinator. The care coordinator will inform them about the steps that are required in order to qualify and ask them to provide certain documentation, and then work with that family and keep the file open for a long period of time to allow the family time to access the program.

I think it's also important for the committee to know that the program is uncapped. We don't have a waiting list for the program, per se, and really welcome families to apply. With the whole new suite of other programs that we're offering, to this point, that has been the only program that the department has been able to offer. As I referenced in my opening remarks, I'm really happy - as are the department and our teams - with the fact that we'll now have a whole suite of programs.

When you layer those on with other programs that are offered through the Department of Health and Wellness, the Office of Addictions and Mental Health, and all of the community-based supports, we'll have much more options for families.

THE CHAIR: MLA Leblanc.

SUSAN LEBLANC: I just want to pick up on a couple of those, what we're just talking about there. What I hear a lot in Dartmouth North from families - when a parent will contact me - is that it's pretty clear the child has some challenge. It might not be autism, per se, but there are learning disabilities or behavioral challenges, or whatever. The problem is that they cannot get an assessment because there's a huge waiting list. There's a waiting list - like a year and a half - for a HRCE-provided psych assessment because there's very few people doing it right now. There's a lot of job openings, from my understanding. Then, to get a private assessment is thousands of dollars and often inaccessible for people.

When I hear about these great programs, it's great. It's great that there's no cap, but do we know about all of the people who aren't in the programs because they actually don't have that qualifying assessment done yet? I just want to know your thoughts on that. Is something being done to address that backlog in terms of getting the assessments in the first place?

TRACEY TAWEEL: I completely agree - there's absolutely a wait-list for some of these assessments. It's part of the reason why we will be removing the IQ requirement from the eligibility criteria for our programming and replacing it with another, more easily-accessible assessment tool. Many physicians - there's a wait-list to have that IQ assessment performed, and they are unwilling to perform it at times. We need to remove that. We've been hearing that for many, many years. That will help remove one of the roadblocks that families often face.

[10:45 a.m.]

Additionally, the Office of Addictions and Mental Health recently announced additional resources to help with that - to help address the backlog. I know there are efforts under way through other departments, as we look at some of the challenges in our health care system, to add more resources to help clear that backlog.

As well, through this expansion of our programming, we'll be looking at adding just a few additional resources to help with this programming so that we can, in fact, receive and support more families as they approach the department.

SUSAN LEBLANC: The other question is, you've described the means assessment for the respite supports, but the other supports that you're talking about, the new things that are coming in, are they also that same means assessment? Or is that just for respite, because that's a thing that someone has to pay for? Can someone who has a higher income go to a family resource centre, for instance, and access some of those excellent programs?

TRACEY TAWEEL: For the disability - those programs that I talked about, yes, they will have the same criteria from an income-testing perspective. What I would point to - and Ms. Fraser made comments to the expansion of program offerings. Through our prevention and early intervention work, we've expanded our programming right across the province. Those programs are more widely accessible to families at the community level than some of the disability support programming would be, which is more targeted and tailored, and it is income assessed.

My hope is that as we continue to expand our prevention and early intervention programming and work with more and more communities, we will have even greater access provided. That is the plan. That is the path that we're on.

As members well know, the Department of Community Services has historically only gotten involved when a family or an individual reaches the point of crisis. We need to flip that so that we are actually involved when there is no crisis, that there are programs that are readily available - and not just programs that are supported by this department, but programs supported by the Department of Communities, Culture, Tourism and Heritage - sport programs, cultural programs. There's a whole range of programming options that families need.

For the topic at hand today, children with disabilities should not be disadvantaged or not be able to access that programming. Helping those families navigate where all of those program options are is certainly part of the work that we feel is incumbent upon us to do, but it's also incumbent upon other members in communities and other departments in government.

SUSAN LEBLANC: I just had a quick question about the pre-approved respite providers. For instance, if I live in East Preston, and I need to take advantage of those programs, so I don't need to now go through my phonebook and try to find someone to take care of my kid or take care of my other kid while - you know, to give me the respite. I can call Ms. Fraser, and do they send someone out? How does it actually work? Do you send someone to my house, or do I bring my family to you so that I can go and do the thing that I need to get done? How does it work?

THE CHAIR: Ms. Fraser or Deputy Minister Taweel.

TRACEY TAWEEL: I can start. I will start and then I'll probably ask my colleague to add a little more information. Right now, we know that one of the challenges - oh, sorry. Thank you for the question. I apologize. I just jumped right in.

Right now, we know that it is a struggle for families, on top of everything else, to figure out who they could approach to provide the level of respite that they need. As we're designing this program now, we will have pre-approved respite providers that families can draw upon. The scope and breadth of that program is being developed right now.

I'll ask my colleague, perhaps, to add a little bit more to my response.

THE CHAIR: Ms. Medioli.

MARIA MEDIOLI: Generally, the way it works - it was a pilot - is that the family would contact the respite agency, who has staff. They would really be discussing how many hours of respite they needed. They would pay the agency for the respite, but it would be the agency that would hire and fire the staff, that would do the scheduling, that ensure that they're appropriately trained, et cetera.

Normally the respite provider goes in the home to support the child, but I'm sure there is flexibility in terms of working out what works best for that particular family, whether it's taking the child to the park. I'm not familiar with any arrangements where the child would actually go, let's say, in the home of the provider, but that's generally how it works. As I said, we did it as a pilot, so we're formalizing it now to firm up exactly the details.

THE CHAIR: Ms. Leblanc, you have just under a minute. MLA Hansen.

SUZY HANSEN: I couldn't not say this thing. I have one minute left, but I just want to say that this is a prime example of how community works within their own community to do the work that needs to be done, because they know the community and they understand that. I'm grateful that the department is seeing that we don't need to bring all the things that we know into this community. Community has an understanding of what it is that they need, and we just need to fund that and make sure they have supports in place to do that work.

This is a really good example, and I'm grateful to hear this today, because I think there are a lot of communities within Nova Scotia that work like this, and this is best for them.

THE CHAIR: Order. The time for the NDP caucus has ended. I will move on to the Progressive Conservative caucus, beginning with MLA White.

JOHN WHITE: My opening was not planned until I listened to our conversation today, and we're talking about community involvement - as Suzy was just talking about as well. I want to share a little story here in a little bit about myself first. In my past life, last year, I was a teacher at a high school. I was teaching a program called PEERS, which is a social relations course for children with autism. It's a pilot program. It's not in very many schools, but it's a fabulous program.

I'm going to share - one young fellow who was selective mute is able today to speak to people standing next to me directly. He has no problem with that. He's just absolutely flourishing. He's just amazing.

The other young fellow became a friend of mine, and he's an adult now. He's still a friend of mine. I still pick him up, we go for coffee, we still hang out. He finished a business administration diploma at NSCC. That was his getting-in point. This is a kid who was fairly severely autistic, very high on the spectrum. He could have easily been pushed aside. He had very little support at home because his mom was unable to help him. He finished his diploma, and now he's doing a degree in accounting and absolutely 99s, scores are through the roof, just amazing. He's working a part-time job with the federal government, and they want him permanently. They're not letting him go.

I just share that as a little example of community involvement, because our interactions matter. What we do and how we react to people absolutely matter. Community involvement is where it begins because when I walk in East Preston, I don't know anybody, I don't know your experiences. Your community is the best to support, so I really do appreciate what you do, and I appreciate you folks being here to help us today.

This is a great topic. It's personal to me. It's in my family, it's everywhere, so I really do appreciate the questions.

My question for Ms. Fraser is really not a big question. I'm wondering if you can elaborate on the challenges that families with children with disabilities face. I've come to know some of it from watching this from afar, but I'm sure you have a lot more you could share with us.

TRINA FRASER: I think there are many challenges, but going back to what you said in regard to talking about community and community supports, I could share many stories as well in regard to who we are as a centre. When I look at the scope of our centre, having a day care centre, having a family resource centre, and being able to get the children involved in our programming at an early age, it helps alleviate many of the challenges that families will have. In saying that, I often say, how could we get the word out more to let people know?

It goes back to what I said in my opening in regard to working with our heart. If more communities encompassed families from the heart, those challenges wouldn't exist as much as they do today. There are many challenges. There are families who not only are discriminated against because they have a child with disabilities, but they could be discriminated against because of the colour of their skin. There are so many things that if I could just say one thing today: getting society to understand and to love, I think it'll put us in a place where those families aren't dealing with as many challenges as they are dealing with today.

Going back a little further and knowing that at one point, I was a participant of the many programs that our centre offers and having a child with special needs myself has allowed me to overcome many obstacles over the years. I've shared that with many families that we work with, and I think it's important and valuable for folks like yourself to share the humanistic part of things. That'll help many families overcome challenges. I hope that answered your question.

JOHN WHITE: I'm a true believer that when we meet here at this point today - I don't know the road you've travelled to get here, I don't know what encounters you had this morning, I don't know what happened as you walked through the door, so I greet you as you are today. I know that we all have a past. I know that MLA Tilley drove up late last night and may be tired because I am, too, but yet we made it before Nolan Young. (Laughter)

I do agree with you 100 per cent that there's good in everybody, and we need to support each other, and we all need to lean on each other sometimes, for sure. I thank you for the work you're doing.

My next question goes to Deputy Minister Taweel who I absolutely adore because you're always amazing when you're here. Can you speak a little bit about the challenges that make children with disabilities more vulnerable to neglect, and situations where the department may have to intervene?

TRACEY TAWEEL: I guess I would start by saying that families that have children with disabilities are not necessarily more prone to neglect - the family just has different challenges that they're trying to navigate. I'm sure we can all attest to this; every family has challenges. To your point, we don't know the road that families are walking upon, and all we can do is provide supports to meet them where they are.

I think that the suite of programs that we will now have available to support families who have children with disabilities will ensure that they hopefully don't reach that crisis point. As I said a moment ago, all families have challenges. When those challenges reach a crisis point, that's where sometimes the department has to get involved.

Our goal, even in those circumstances, is always to keep those families together. The best possible place for children is to remain with their families, and if that means that we need to provide extra support - even if the child has to temporarily leave the home to stabilize that family unit, then that's exactly what we need to do.

The last point I guess I would make is that, just like every child, every family is unique. We can't apply a cookie cutter approach to any family or to any child. We have to make sure that we fully and completely understand all of the strengths and all of the challenges of that family, and we maximize those strengths and then maybe provide a little bit of support to help bridge those gaps.

Families who have children with disabilities love their children. They want them to be successful, they want them to have lives as have been described here - lives without limitation - and that's what we should all want. That's what these programs are going to help us to support families to do.

JOHN WHITE: As I said, you're amazing. Excellent answer, appreciate it. Thank you. I'm going to pass it on to MLA Young.

NOLAN YOUNG: Before I start, in my previous life I was a faculty member at NSCC, as was Mr. Tilley, so I would give a shoutout to Ms. Shortte.

I have a couple of questions for Deputy Minister Taweel wrapped into one. Can you tell us about the role of the department regarding reading intervention? Are there various degrees of intervention depending on risk assessment, and how early can the department be involved to ensure a child with a disability is being cared for?

TRACEY TAWEEL: Perhaps I'll start with the back end of your question first. The department can become involved at the very earliest stages. Working with our partners at the IWK, for example, we can identify early the supports that families may require. The implementation of this new programming will allow Community Services to get involved at a number of different levels.

[11:00 a.m.]

As I referenced a moment ago, in another response, prior to the rollout of these new programs that we're working on now, we only had the DFSC - the Direct Family Support for Children program - that provided respite. That was all we were really able to provide - respite and supports for other medical interventions and other assistive devices. Now we will have a whole suite of other programs that we can bring to bear.

Additionally, I believe MLA Tilley asked a question about the other programs that are available in other departments. As we stand up these programs, we will be working even more collaboratively with our colleagues in other departments and agencies and with community-based organizations to wrap around those families as early as possible - to follow up on my previous response - so that those families don't end up in a crisis situation.

Those early days are really critical, and the supports that are provided in community or through the department and other departments are really critical to get that family off on the right footing.

NOLAN YOUNG: Speaking of programming, can you tell us a bit more about the youth day programming and the intense family support pilot programs? Can you share any updates on how things are going?

TRACEY TAWEEL: As I referenced earlier, the youth day programming and the intense family support program - we piloted those programs in 2019. They were extremely successful. We heard from families and participants and youth that what was really missing, what they really needed when it comes to day programming, were options that were more tailored to the needs and the interests of youth.

The day programming that we will stand up is in direct response to what those participants told us. We piloted it through - Summer Street?

MARIA MEDIOLI: Through a variety. There were 16.

TRACEY TAWEEL: Through 16 different sites, and the feedback was amazing. So we will stand that up as a permanent program offering. That will allow youth to have choice and options in terms of the day programming that they want to pursue.

When it comes to the intense family support program, that program involved very intensive wraparound support with families to identify the needs, as I referenced earlier, not just of the child in the home that has the disability but also perhaps the other siblings in the home, the parents, the extended family, the access to community supports, and a variety of other supports that might be required in order to help that family be successful - so psychosocial supports.

There might need to be support from a nutrition perspective. There might need to be support from a community engagement perspective, from a physical activity perspective. If the child has an intellectual disability, there may be other interventions that are required. So the intense family support program is intended to look holistically at that family as an intact unit and to define what supports are required for that family to be as successful as possible. Certainly respite supports would be part of that as well.

NOLAN YOUNG: I have one more coming at you, Deputy Minister Taweel. In our most recent budget, we see that there are funding increases year over year that offer more services and programs. What are the dollar amounts, and what will these new services and programs look like?

TRACEY TAWEEL: From a supports-for-children perspective, the budget is increasing from $10.6 million to $14.2 million. I referenced earlier that we have uncapped the Independent Living Support program. That is an $8.3 million investment this year growing to just over $16 million next year and ongoing, and that will clear our wait-list.

In addition, the committee would be very familiar with the closure of large congregate sites. There's an additional $16.4 million in the budget this year that builds on previous investments and will continue to grow in out years.

MARIA MEDIOLI: One other investment that I think is really important is an additional $3.5 million this year. To be honest, I forget the exact amount over four years, but it's to move young people with severe physical disabilities out of long-term care. As you may be familiar, young people with severe physical disabilities who need 24/7 medical care currently reside in long-term care. We've received that investment. It's a passion project for me, and it just makes a lot of sense. We'll make space in long-term care, but we'll transition young people to community.

NOLAN YOUNG: I'll pass it to my colleague MLA Barkhouse.

THE CHAIR: MLA Barkhouse.

DANIELLE BARKHOUSE: First, I'd like to say, Ms. Fraser, when you were last speaking, you almost had me in tears. As a mother with a disabled child, I know exactly what you're talking about.

This question is actually to you and Ms. Shortte. Cultural responsiveness is an important part of inclusive care. How important is it for those receiving care services and/or are on an educational journey, particularly those with disabilities, to seek diversity in their journey and from those they receive services from?

THE CHAIR: Ms. Shortte.

MOASHELLA SHORTTE: Right now, in my role I am helping to qualify ECEs who look like the families they're serving, and I can testify to the fact that nothing is more crucial. Representation at all levels is key to success of any program, any intervention, any service. When you don't have to explain yourself, when you can reserve your energy for what is needed and not in explaining the obvious to the people who are serving you, things are done way more efficiently.

THE CHAIR: Ms. Fraser, did you want to add anything?

TRINA FRASER: For myself, being a parent with a child with special needs and looking at how our province was 25 years ago when I started that journey, I have to say my hat goes off to many organizations within our society. They have made way and have made change within their organization to allow me, as a young Black mother at the time, to have a place where my daughter and I could go to get the supports that we needed to make us feel welcome, to make us feel that we weren't alone in the journey that we were going through. When I couldn't be in my community, there was an outside community.

If I'm allowed to say, the IWK has come a long way in regard to being able to provide those supports. Even for myself as a young woman back when, taking the ECE course and not seeing anybody who looked like me, not seeing anybody who was working with the children that came from my community out in other centres, and now seeing how we've changed in society, that we know the importance of that, and we know the importance of listening to people who have had those experiences.

THE CHAIR: MLA Barkhouse, you have until 11:11 a.m.

DANIELLE BARKHOUSE: Ms. Taweel, other than the great not-for-profit organizations like we have here today, can you tell us what other resources are available to help families support their children with disabilities?

TRACEY TAWEEL: There are a variety of resources that are available. Not all of them are necessarily delivered or supported financially through the Department of Community Services, but there are a number of resources available. Ms. Fraser referenced the IWK, the Nova Scotia Health Authority, the Department of Health and Wellness, and, certainly, the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development have a number of school-based programs that are available to provide supports.

I will reference one particular group - People First of Nova Scotia, who you may be familiar with. People First is an organization that is run by and supports persons with disabilities. They run a program where they go into schools and they teach young people about the importance of respecting their fellow students who may have a disability, learning the appropriate language, how to behave, how to provide the appropriate supports, and to be inclusive and welcoming.

I'd like to pick up on Ms. Fraser's comments as well about organizations working hard to ensure that there are culturally responsive programs in place. That's a significant area of growth for the Department of Community Services, one that we're particularly focused on in all of our programming, both inside the department and outside. With respect to the Disability Support Program, we are looking at all of our programming and working with community on an Afrocentric lens through all of our programming which has been sorely missing. That intersectionality between having a disability and race, we've not historically looked at that.

I just need to say that I couldn't agree more with the need for more representation and the need to ensure that services are being delivered by individuals who look like those who are being served.

THE CHAIR: Now we will head to the rapid-fire round. There are 13 minutes, so it's not as rapid as it should be - change the name - but we will go to MLA Nicole.

LORELEI NICOLL: It's "Nicoll," Madam Chair. I always say I'm worth five cents. That helps people remember the pronunciation.

A lot of information shared this morning. I thank you. The more you share, the more questions we seem to get. I'm going to try to be concise in that regard. I know that Ms. Medioli did not talk very much, so I guess I was going to ask you with regard to disabilities themselves - we talked about intersectionality, which is a great conversation, but also, with disability, we conjure up an idea of what disability is. We came along the lines of autism and everything else, but we never really spoke too much about the physical disabilities.

I just wanted you to expand - I got the impression that the data currently, from when the deputy minister spoke, that you might not have as much data available to you? I just was trying to get an idea of a snapshot of where we are as a province with regard to the needs of the disabled in our youth and our children.

MARIA MEDIOLI: I'm going to do my little pitch at the beginning. I don't even like to use the term disability. I would say that the new approach is "diversability." Disability sometimes suggests less than, whereas I like diversability because it represents the richness that everybody brings. I think the message I always try to impart is that persons of diverse abilities bring something special to our community, and our communities are richer for it. I often try to use that language, but sometimes - I mean, disability is the standard.

I will say that in terms of data around disability, there are challenges, because there is not an official definition of disability. We have eligibility criteria in our program, and it's a physical disability or an intellectual disability, and for adults, it also includes long-term mental health diagnosis. The data that are available - I think you've probably heard, for example - it's often quoted that we have the highest rate of disability in the country. That's based on census data, and that's self reported. It is a little challenging, since we don't know how to break that down. It's not like then they go further and say exactly what that disability consists of.

There are different criteria for different disabilities. I'll say that. The data are challenging. We could tell you - I'd have to go into the system - what our participants have been diagnosed as and what - often they have multiple what we call comorbidities. Often an intellectual disability might also occur with a physical disability. We could pull those numbers to tell you what the majority are. But in large part, historically our program has focused on those with intellectual disabilities who might also have a physical disability and/or, often, long-term mental health issues.

[11:15 a.m.]

As I mentioned previously about the young people who are in long-term care, they don't have an intellectual disability. It's based on an old model. It is a bit of an antiquated approach that disability is a medical condition, and hence they end up in long-term care. We are trying to change that philosophy and approach, and the fact that everybody of diversability should be able to live in community and that they don't need to be in facility-based care.

LORELEI NICOLL: I was going by the title of your program, so therefore I look forward to it being changed from disability to diversability in that regard. You highlight the point that there are a lot of people with needs, but it's very difficult for them to ask for help, so it's hard to get that accurate data in that regard.

Again, with regard to data, how many children with diversability are currently living in this province? Do you have that kind of - who currently live in poverty in this province, so that you have that sort of understanding as well?

TRACEY TAWEEL: We wouldn't be able to break down the data to that level, no.

LORELEI NICOLL: I ask because my colleague had asked earlier about the intersectionality with poverty as well in that regard. Again, I applaud everything that the East Preston Family Resource Centre does, and if you had the data, wouldn't it be nice if you could know exactly how many more centres like this you actually need across Nova Scotia? How many exist now? I know you mentioned there are 695 families that you have registered, that you are helping, and someone referred to 16 sites, so I'm just trying to get the math as to how many more are needed.

It's been pointed out how when you have that physical presence in the community, people gravitate to it, but there are a lot of communities across Nova Scotia that don't know where to go, let alone get the wraparound services, that is the political speak, that's out there.

TRACEY TAWEEL: The number I quoted earlier was, I believe, about 690. Those individuals are supported through the Direct Family Support for Children program. That is not representative necessarily of those families who would be accessing other programming through prevention and early intervention. I was merely quoting that program, the individuals who have access. I believe there are 16 family resource centres across the province. My colleague here is trying to flip through to find the number. I think it's 16 that are available.

Family resource centres, as you have seen today, are an amazing community hub, if you will, that provide fantastic support. In addition to family resource centres, Boys and Girls Clubs, the YMCAs and YWCAs, there is a very long list of partners that we work with at the community level who are engaged in providing supports for families. I'd be really happy to provide the committee with a comprehensive list of the organizations that we work with.

As a whole, the department has well over 350 service providers that we partner with from one end of the province to the other. They provide a variety of supports in recognition of the fact that community-based service providers understand what their community members need. The time has long since passed where government should be swooping in and acting like we know better than our service providers and we know better than community members.

LORELEI NICOLL: How much time do I have?

THE CHAIR: You have until 11:24 a.m.

LORELEI NICOLL: To that point, again, just wondering what you're saying about what you're trying to do. I understand that. We know that the pandemic has added a lot more strain on that, so in that regard as to your excitement with the uncapping and everything else. Is it going to be manageable, given the uptake in the need that has presented itself during the pandemic?

TRACEY TAWEEL: I believe so, yes. The new program options that we've talked about will be stood up over the next one to three years. We're doing it in conjunction with families, with our care coordinators who work in the department, to make sure that when we stand up a program, it will be successful. The uncapping of the Independent Living Support Program will be working with individuals to help them successfully move to community.

As a reminder, that program supports individuals with the lowest level of need. So, certainly, finding appropriate accommodation when we do have housing challenges will be a challenge for some individuals. But we are hopeful that with the support of our care coordinators, in collaboration with our colleagues in the Department of Municipal Affairs and Housing and other community resources, we will be able to successfully have 200 people move off the wait-list this year, and another 200 next year. That's the goal, and we're going to do our best to achieve it.

LORELEI NICOLL: She brought up another question for me, see? It's back to NSCC, possibly. I believe every person, every individual has value, and as we try to move them back to community, are you also going to be looking for working opportunities for them to get them into the workforce? Is that part of getting them back into the community?

TRACEY TAWEEL: Thank you for that question, and the answer is yes, absolutely. We do fund some organizations to provide job coaches. For example, Autism Nova Scotia is funded to provide job coaches and to work with individuals to help them successfully transition to employment that makes sense for them. In addition to that, through our Employment Support and Income Assistance program, we do offer employment supports to individuals who are on the Income Assistance caseload, to help connect them to job coaches and job opportunities. We have a variety of programs available that target youth and adults also.

LORELEI NICOLL: I look forward to getting that information from you because it would be very helpful to all MLAs as they serve to know where the services are. It's hard to believe, but some people feel that we're the intake too, so therefore that would be very helpful. Also, what would be very helpful - again, a lot of people ask me, what the heck are wraparound services? If you can define that in a short answer, I would be most appreciative. (Laughter)

TRACEY TAWEEL: I'll try my best because I think there are only 30 seconds left. From our perspective, wraparound support is providing families with everything they need to be successful.

LORELEI NICOLL: To quickly say, it's also based on the assessment that you do as to what the actual . . .

TRACEY TAWEEL: Yes, absolutely. It's based on the unique needs of that family. When I think about wraparound supports, I literally think of this, and that's what we need. We literally need to wrap - maybe not literally, it may not be welcomed by some, but figuratively wrap our arms around families who need support. That may mean - those arms may be Ms. Fraser's arms, they may be mine, they may be Ms. Medioli's. Whatever is needed to help that family based on their unique needs, that's what wraparound is to me.

It also extends beyond us. It needs to be holistic. We have to stop looking at people in compartments. They are whole people. They are whole families. So our response by extension needs to be whole. It needs to be holistic.

THE CHAIR: Any final, quick comments, MLA Nicoll?

LORELEI NICOLL: I was just going to say that is how I would try to explain it to people, but it's nice to have an elevator speech too to explain exactly what it is.

In closing, I will take my time to thank Ms. Fraser and Ms. Shortte for being here today.

THE CHAIR: Order. The time for the Liberal questions has ended. We will move to the NDP caucus and MLA Hansen.

SUZY HANSEN: We were talking about intervention and early intervention. Sometimes those things could be as early as at the hospital, or after you're noticing some signs of things happening. Intervention early is absolutely great and it's essential, especially when it comes to disability supports, but as we know, our Indigenous communities' and African Nova Scotian communities' experience with the Department of Community Services has been extremely problematic.

How can we change the narrative or the messaging to the parents who have a child with higher needs than normal when DCS does get involved? Because we know that DCS is there to support and to help, in whatever way that looks like. How can we change that messaging for those families that may feel like it's going to be a traumatic or a triggering situation when that intervention happens early? I'm going to ask the deputy minister this question, and then I'll also ask the resource centre as well.

TRACEY TAWEEL: I couldn't agree with you more. Historically, the engagement of the department - not just in this jurisdiction, but historically, engagement with Indigenous communities and African Nova Scotian communities and other marginalized communities has not been what it should be. It has, in fact, probably been more traumatic and has caused further damage, so I think there are a number of things that we need to do.

First of all, we need to acknowledge that that is the case. We need to acknowledge that there is a lack of trust, and that that has a basis in reality. There's a reason why there's a lack of trust. We see overrepresentation of racialized populations within our system, and we need to work really hard to put supports like the ones we're talking about today in place so that we can reverse that trend. Part of that involves being in community, having strong partners like Ms. Fraser, like the family resource centres. It involves - I say this in the department a lot - going into community, asking questions, and listening, and then going back and saying we're here again because we want a relationship.

Historically, I think - and Community Services wouldn't be alone in this - we've gone into community, we've done a consultation, we might have already made a decision about what we were going to do. We've gone in, we've said we're consulting, and we've said we'll be back, and then we don't go back. We can't do that. There's no quicker way to erode trust than to break your word, so we need to go in, sit down and stay a while, and build our relationship and build trust.

I also think there are some very practical things we can do, as I referenced earlier. The Afrocentric engagement and review that we're doing on our programming on all our disability support programs, that will be probably an 18-month engagement at the community level. We're intentionally moving slowly through that, because we recognize there is a lack of awareness, first of all, about the program offerings that are available, and when you compound that with a lack of trust and historic broken word and relationships, and feelings that exist in the community that are real and legitimate, we need to go in and stay a while, and have a conversation and really listen. We're doing that, as well, on all of our income assistance programming, our employment support programming, and, as well, with all of our child welfare programming. This is a long-term effort.

[11:30 a.m.]

I guess the last point that I would make is that within the department, as well, we have an Inclusion, Diversity & Community Relations team. That team is working inside the Department of Community Services. The department is one of the few departments in government - we have our own anti-Black racism policy that is a mandatory policy within the department. It's also mandatory for every employee of the department to have a performance goal related to what they will do to enhance their learning around anti-Black racism, and to ensure that the services they are providing are culturally responsive. We've also rolled out mandatory training that was custom-designed for our department based on the services that we provide. We've begun that work over the last couple of years, and there's much more work to come. It's a very long-term piece of work that we need to do.

TRINA FRASER: One of the things that came to mind when the deputy minister was speaking is looking at where we were years ago versus where we are today. Just to name one of the programs that operates out of our centre that's supported by the Department of Community Services: our Parenting Journey program. When that program started, one of the biggest goals for us was to create relationships that would allow communication back and forth in regard to if there were a situation that children may have been apprehended.

How could our Parenting Journey worker communicate with the social worker and make sure there's none of the hierarchy of "I can't communicate with you, and I can't share with you," allowing our Parenting Journey home visitor to share with Community Services the involvement that a family may have had with programs at our centre? That Parenting Journey home visitor has been very successful over the years in creating those everlasting relationships between our family resource centre and the department, because tables that we weren't at before we are at now. I think that's very important: to make sure those relationships are built, allowing families to alleviate some of the stressors that they may have in knowing that I have a team coming with me and we're going to be at the table together.

THE CHAIR: MLA Hansen, you have until 11:37 a.m.

SUZY HANSEN: Susan has a question.

THE CHAIR: MLA Leblanc.

SUSAN LEBLANC: I just want to build on that. That seems great, that seems amazing, and that system seems amazing. I can speak for the parent resource centre, which is now called The North Grove in Dartmouth North, but it started as the Dartmouth Family Centre. I think it's one of the 16, and the stuff that they do is incredible. What about the folks whom they don't reach, or your centre doesn't reach? What do you think about that? I still now encounter people, not people with kids, but people who are food insecure, and we direct them toward The North Grove and the programs there, and they're like, I never knew this existed.

Granted, The North Grove is only five or six years old, but by now you'd think that the word would be out, but no. It's amazing how many people still don't know about the resources. I think about so many people who come to us who have cases where their children have been removed, and they don't get any information. They know that they're supposed to take a parenting course, but it's really tricky to figure out a) to get the counsellor, like the Policy 75 counsellor or whatever they're called, or the parenting course, and then if they're doing counselling, how the good reviews or the good reports from the counsellor get back to the department or to the caseworker or whatever.

It feels like the lines of communication are really broken in many cases. If it's working really well for folks who are connected to the parent resource centre or the family resource centre, is there a way to connect all families to a resource centre? How can we help the folks who aren't connected? Big question.

TRINA FRASER: I've often thought about those families who aren't as blessed or as privileged to be part of our programs because they don't know about them. I've jokingly said in the past, as I was a child growing up, commercials always work. (Laughter) Often we hear people say "by word of mouth." I think if there was - and there might be some other family resource directors that come after me later - I think if there was an advertising of what we do, and I say "come after me later" because then my fear would be making sure that there are enough supports in place.

I think in all reality that if we continue to work collaboratively as organizations, as government, as society, and allow even just our own family members to know what's out there and don't keep it a secret. There are times in the past that yes, family resource centres were probably one of the best-kept secrets because families wanted to make sure there was space for them.

One of the things that our organization does is often we're asked if there's a wait-list. I never say there is a wait-list. I don't care if we have 40 people in the room, we will make room to allow space for others. Again, going back to all of that and saying just working collaboratively, spreading the word. Even for centres that may feel, okay, we're not reaching the people we need to be reaching, what's happening here, is looking within and reaching out and maybe saying to the next family resource centre: How can we work together collaboratively? Some of your people may be at the table with our people and we can provide those inclusive programs.

THE CHAIR: Deputy Minister Taweel, you have some comments? Or Ms. Shortte.

MOASHELLA SHORTTE: I just wanted to add something to what Trina was saying. Currently with my students in the Africentric Cohort, one of our assignments is that they're building a resource reservoir within their community. It's exactly for this reason. There are a lot of great resources that the people who can benefit from them don't have access to.

But it makes me think one of the issues is representation and involvement, but at the right stage: from the start. If we get the right people in, the people who are going to benefit from this access, if we're tapping into what their needs are and how they can best access that from the very beginning, the word will go to the right people at the right time. Oftentimes we bring community in. Community knows best how to serve and support community. If we make those collaborations, as Trina was talking about earlier, at the right stage, from the start, then we have better uptake of our programs and services.

THE CHAIR: Deputy Minister Taweel, you have a little over 30 seconds.

TRACEY TAWEEL: I'll be really quick. I wanted to, first of all, correct: There are 26 family resource centres, not 16. Sorry about that.

I just wanted to make the committee aware that we are working with Inclusion NS on the design and development of a series of guidebooks that will, when it comes to services for persons with disabilities - youth, adults - these guidebooks will serve as a resource to help do exactly what you're referencing, Ms. Leblanc, in terms of something that we can have in all of your offices, that can be available online, to help navigate all of the various programs and services. They'll be broken down kind of by life stage and need. I think that'll be a really valuable resource.

THE CHAIR: The time for the NDP caucus has ended. We will move on to the Progressive Conservative caucus, beginning with MLA White.

JOHN WHITE: Deputy Minister Taweel, I heard that the My Days program is a new initiative, and I'm ashamed to say I don't know anything about it. Are you able to tell me anything about that today?

TRACEY TAWEEL: This is another one that we're really excited about. To this point, we have had what we would call "adult day programs." That would be something that we'd all be familiar with. We have a number of fantastic service providers who provide programming for persons with disabilities, where people go to volunteer and to work during the day.

The My Days program was designed with participants and with service providers basically through the philosophy that we shouldn't be prescriptive about how persons with disabilities want to spend their days. It should be their choice. So moving forward - initially we are beginning with participants who are moving out of Harbourside in Yarmouth, which is the first of our congregate sites that will close.

We've worked with those individuals. They will be able to identify how they want to spend their day. If they want to work at a previously known day program or if they want to spend their day horseback riding, or there are other volunteer pursuits that they want to pursue, funding will be tied to them so that they can make decisions about how they spend their day.

If we think about it, no one - our days are not prescribed to us. We have free will in terms of how we spend our days, except if we're invited to a committee like this and we have to come. (Laughter) Beyond that, we have free will. Right, Kim?

As we move toward a world where there shouldn't be limitations placed and people should have an opportunity to choose how they spend their day, the My Days program will support that. The name My Days emerged through consultation and discussion with participants who said, essentially, this is my day. I deserve to be able to select where I spend my day. We will over time shift our funding so that individuals have choice and community resources will, in effect, be options for those individuals, and they will get to choose how they use those resources.

JOHN WHITE: I'm a little bit familiar with some of that because I'm a founding member of Touch on Wood in Sydney, which is a shelter workshop. That's awesome, that's amazing. I love that.

Anyway, I've got to say, I'm sure you'd agree, we've been doing this all year long, and I have not had a Community Services meeting where "community" was said more. Would you agree? This has been absolutely amazing. To you folks, Ms. Fraser and Ms. Shortte, our committee, our caucus, when we were talking about this, we talked about how you instill a sense of community in everything you do. Just before I pass on to MLA Taggart, I just want to give you a chance to elaborate more on the value. I know you touched on it a few times, but I just want to give you a chance if you wanted to talk a little more about how important it is for families with disabilities to be part of a community, if there's anything else you want to say before I pass to Mr. Taggart.

TRINA FRASER: A lot has been said today. Going back to what I said in the beginning in regard to working with the heart and working from the heart, there are times that there have been children with disabilities or diversabilities come into our centre and parents say to us, please just treat them like you would treat the rest of the children. I think that gives value to how successful children are, how successful families are, that if as a society we can work together and know that, if I walk in with a disability, I'm going to walk out with pride and joy and know that I was accepted.

I think that's a value that comes from me, that's a value that has been instilled in me through my community by way of my elders, by way of my colleagues, my bosses before me, and I just want to carry that on. If there's one thing that I could instill into the families that we work with, it is that we're all the same. We're all equal.

THE CHAIR: Ms. Shortte, did you want to add any final comments?

MOASHELLA SHORTTE: I'm not sure how much more I can add. My mind is flooded with so many incredible experiences of how well our centre has made it space-inclusive for all children and all families. I'm thinking back to one particular child who had gained enough courage and confidence to teach her fellow classmates about her disability. When we do that, when we leave room for these children and these families to feel empowered, and to feel valued regardless of their ability, it just transcends throughout the whole space in a way that benefits us all.

THE CHAIR: MLA Taggart.

TOM TAGGART: First, Ms. Fraser, I think that one of the purposes of these committee meetings is to educate us MLAs on the challenges and maybe some of the successes, but particularly challenges that folks in different sectors face. I read the briefing yesterday in preparation for this meeting. I sat here today and I listened to all of the questions and your answers, and I have to say that whoever chose the people to come to this committee today, when they chose you, they did an outstanding job. I've truly been educated, and I'd like a minute afterwards just to ask a question.

Anyway, having said that, the Province has recently made investments to make facilities in our community more accessible. Through the Community ACCESS-Ability Program, we invested over $187,500 in recreation facilities and playgrounds. In my riding specifically, the Great Village Elementary Playground Committee has recently received $33,000 towards creating a more accessible and inclusive playground. Can you tell us about the benefits of investing in inclusive and accessible playgrounds?

[11:45 a.m.]

TRINA FRASER: I think there's definitely so much value in giving our children and our families the ability to take part and be included in anything their peers would be included in. As you talk about that - I just read an article recently about a beach where there were accessible avenues to get to that beach. I'm thinking of the playgrounds, the beaches, the places that normally - for myself, back in the day, I didn't see a child on the beach in a wheelchair, and now, to be able to see that, to say that as a family, they can come together and be there.

Going back to the playgrounds within school systems, within daycares, within communities - it's very valuable. Then we're not seeing teachers carrying children over to an area of the playground where that child has not had access to.

I hope I'm touching on the question in regard to saying that. It's very beneficial for the fact that those children are made to feel included. That's the most important thing.

TOM TAGGART: I'll hand off now to MLA Barkhouse.

THE CHAIR: MLA Barkhouse, you have until 11:50.

DANIELLE BARKHOUSE: Deputy Minister Taweel, many families, including those that have children with disabilities, are dealing with pressures associated with the rising costs of living. What are we doing to help alleviate some of those pressures?

TRACEY TAWEEL: Certainly families who are actively engaged in working with the Department of Community Services would be eligible for, potentially, special needs funding or additional supports. Working with their care coordinator or their caseworker - depending on who they're working with - there may be other supports that can be brought to bear to help that family through a difficult time, whether it's utility bills or access to food, things like that.

Certainly there are programs that are available within the department, or additional supports available within. In addition to that, we have also provided additional funding to community-based food banks, to Feed Nova Scotia, to support their entire network across the province, and additional funding to family resource centres to provide additional levels of support at the community level to support families.

There is no doubt that families do need additional support right now - many families - which is why we've been providing support at the community level, as well as within the department.

DANIELLE BARKHOUSE: Can you talk a little bit about the earned income exemption program and how this program benefits families with children with disabilities?

TRACEY TAWEEL: The earned income exemption program allows for individuals who are currently on the Income Assistance caseload to return to work and keep more of their income. Previously, it was very challenging for individuals to work and remain on the Income Assistance caseload. At present now, with the new - well, it's actually not new now. I guess it's been a few years now since it was rolled out - but with the earned income exemption, it allows families to retain more of their income while remaining on Income Assistance. The rate begins to reduce a bit depending on the income that the individual earns.

Ultimately, it means that those individuals are bringing a higher level of income into their homes, which can help stabilize that home. Individuals who are in receipt of the Nova Scotia Child Benefit, for example, in combination with that program, are qualified for the Low Income Pharmacare for Children program, which enables them to receive drug coverage for their children at a flat cost of $5 per prescription, regardless of the cost of that prescription.

When you combine the Nova Scotia Child Benefit, the earned income exemption, the Low Income Pharmacare For Children program, along with a whole other host of programs, it does help families who have children with disabilities bring in more income into that home and have access to further programs and supports that can help them.

THE CHAIR: Deputy Minister Taweel, you impressed me, I have to say. You finished right on the dot. Thank you. (Laughter) At this point, I wanted to thank all the witnesses for being here today at the committee. It was an extremely good topic to discuss in such a good room and good colleagues to discuss that with. I will ask if anybody had any final remarks they would like to make. Deputy Minister Taweel.

TRACEY TAWEEL: I will just say thank you and thank all of you as MLAs for the role that you play in supporting families. Know that the door is always open for any briefings or a better understanding about the programs and services that we provide.

THE CHAIR: Ms. Fraser, did you want to have a few remarks?

TRINA FRASER: I would just echo what the deputy minister has said in regard to saying thank you to you all. If we continue to be who we are and share what's available, I think it will help the many families that we work with.

THE CHAIR: The witnesses are welcome at this point in the meeting to leave, or you can stay. We don't have any committee business today, so to speak, so did anybody have something that wasn't on the agenda?

Seeing nothing, I just want to remind everybody that the committee doesn't meet in July or August, so we're going to fast forward to our next meeting date, which will be September 6, 2022, and the topic for that meeting is the Community Homes Action Group.

Witnesses who will be called are the Department of Community Services, so you'll be back in the Fall, and the Disability Rights Coalition of Nova Scotia regarding the progress update on phasing out adult residential centre and regional rehabilitation centre facilities. The timing for that is very good.

If there is no further business, then the meeting is adjourned.

[The committee adjourned at 11:52 a.m.]