

# **HANSARD**

**NOVA SCOTIA HOUSE OF ASSEMBLY**

**STANDING COMMITTEE**

**ON**

**COMMUNITY SERVICES**

**Tuesday, January 10, 2023**

**Committee Room**

**The Impact of the Cost of Living Crisis on Vulnerable Nova Scotians and Those  
Living on Income Assistance**

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## **COMMUNITY SERVICES COMMITTEE**

Melissa Sheehy-Richard (Chair)

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Suzy Hansen

[Kendra Coombes was replaced by Gary Burrill.]

### In Attendance:

Gordon Hebb  
Chief Legislative Counsel

Kim Leadley  
Acting Legislative Committee Clerk

### WITNESSES

#### Department of Community Services

Tracey Taweel - Deputy Minister

Joy Knight - Executive Director, Employment Support and Income Assistance

#### Feed Nova Scotia

Sylvia Parris-Drummond - Chairperson

Nick Jennery - Executive Director

#### Chebucto Connections

Christina Carter - Executive Director

#### Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives - Nova Scotia

Christine Saulnier - Executive Director

#### Nourish Nova Scotia

Lisa Roberts - Executive Director



**HALIFAX, TUESDAY, JANUARY 10, 2023**

**STANDING COMMITTEE ON COMMUNITY SERVICES**

**10:00 A.M.**

**CHAIR**  
**MELISSA SHEEHY-RICHARD**

**VICE CHAIR**  
**John White**

THE CHAIR: Order. I call the Standing Committee on Community Services to order. I'm Melissa Sheehy-Richard, MLA for Hants West and Chair of this committee. I want to welcome you here this morning. Today, we're going to hear from witnesses and presenters regarding the impact of the cost of living crisis on vulnerable Nova Scotians and those living on income assistance.

I just want to remind everybody to put your devices on silent if you haven't done so already. In case of an emergency, we ask that you please use the Granville Street exit and meet up in the Grand Parade.

I'd now ask the committee members to introduce themselves for the record by stating their name and their constituency. We will begin with MLA White.

[The committee members introduced themselves.]

THE CHAIR: I would also like to note the presence of Chief Legislative Counsel Gordon Hebb and Acting Legislative Committee Clerk Kim Leadley.

Today's topic is the impact of the cost of living crisis on vulnerable Nova Scotians. At this point, I welcome the witnesses to introduce themselves as well. After that, we will ask them to give their opening remarks. I will begin with Deputy Minister Taweel.

[The witnesses introduced themselves.]

THE CHAIR: Welcome, everybody. At this point I would welcome Deputy Minister Taweel to give her opening remarks.

TRACEY TAWHEEL: Good morning, and thank you again for the invitation to be here today to talk about the impact of the cost of living crisis on vulnerable Nova Scotians and those living on income assistance. As I referenced, joining me today is Joy Knight, Executive Director of Employment Support and Income Assistance.

It is a pleasure to be here today with the witnesses who have just introduced themselves to talk about this important issue. I believe we all have the same goals here: to work with vulnerable Nova Scotians to enable them to support themselves and their families. Some people face higher barriers and more significant challenges, and we need to work together to make sure that people have the support and access to the support that they need.

Over the last few months, significant investments have been made to address and prevent homelessness, develop supportive housing, reduce food insecurity, and increase supports to families with children. These investments included an additional \$250 one-time payment for income assistance clients; a \$1,000 one-time payment to full-time foster families; \$3 million for disability support program residential facilities and child and youth care programs that support children in the care of the minister; \$3 million for food banks and organizations including Feed Nova Scotia; \$2.6 million for 26 family resource centres across the province; and additional funding for transition houses that support women and children fleeing domestic violence.

Additionally, as part of a \$100 million effort to help low- and middle-income Nova Scotians with home heating, more people will be eligible for the Heating Assistance Rebate Program this year, and the rebate will increase from \$200 to \$1,000.

There is no question that we have been living through extraordinary circumstances, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, Hurricane Fiona, and an affordable-housing shortage that continues to impact our most vulnerable citizens. These extraordinary circumstances require short-term and long-term solutions.

I just provided a summary of some of the immediate-term measures that have been implemented, but we must also remain focused on system changes that will help to lift people out of poverty permanently. For example, last Summer, government increased the Nova Scotia Child Benefit with a \$16 million new annual investment. This is helping low-income Nova Scotian families to better meet their needs over the longer term. In the next few weeks, government will make changes to the rent supplement program to provide more funding to income assistance clients to better help them meet their housing-related needs. This increased funding will come into effect this Winter and will support over 2,000 clients.

We are focused on creating safe places for people to stay and be supported while we collectively work with our colleagues across government to increase the affordable housing stock in this province. In the last two months, we have announced four new temporary emergency shelters in Halifax, Dartmouth, Amherst, and Lower Sackville for those experiencing homelessness. This work has increased the available shelter beds by 80 to ensure people have a roof over their heads during the colder Winter months.

Shelters are not the long-term solution. We believe supportive housing is the path to help more Nova Scotians. Currently, we are implementing the province's first supportive housing action plan to expand the number of units available province-wide. We're working with our colleagues in the Department of Municipal Affairs and Housing, the Department of Health and Wellness, the Office of Addictions and Mental Health, and the Department of Justice.

We know that a preventive focus is critical to help lift individuals and families out of poverty permanently. This approach requires a long-term commitment and the collective efforts of government, stakeholder partners, and communities to meet the needs of all Nova Scotians. There is still much more work to do, and we will continue to work diligently to identify and implement further measures to help Nova Scotians.

THE CHAIR: Mr. Jennery.

NICK JENNERY: Thank you for the opportunity to be here. In 2017, we met somebody who described being on income assistance as flailing around in the water with no life raft. It's been six years now since then, and thousands of people are still waiting for that life raft. They continue to wait through hurricanes, through the pandemic, through the housing crisis, through historic inflation, and through skyrocketing food and living costs.

When people talk about the cost of living, the conversation often centres around being pushed to the margins for the first time, the number of people lining up at a food bank for the first time, who have never had to ask for help. It's a critical data point. It's one that we do measure to illustrate the scope of the crisis. There is an equally, if not more critical conversation that needs to happen about Nova Scotians who have been left behind for decades and continue to get pushed deeper and deeper into poverty.

Income assistance rates in our province are grossly below the poverty line. They afford no one a life raft of dignity, let alone one in which they can access their most basic needs. Feed Nova Scotia data finds that at any given time, approximately 40 to 45 per cent of people visiting food banks report income assistance as their primary source of income.

Statistics from PROOF, a department within the University of Toronto that examines effective policy intervention to reduce household food insecurity, show that 74 per cent of households reliant on income assistance in Nova Scotia in 2021 were food insecure. The program that's supposed to help Nova Scotians when they can't support

themselves and their families actually pushes them into food insecurity. Since the driving factor behind food insecurity is a lack of income, this shouldn't come as a surprise to anyone.

We need to understand the true reality of Nova Scotians who are accessing food banks. Without food banks, people would be a lot worse off, but food banks are merely a stop gap. People are receiving approximately three to five days' worth of food per month from food banks just to get them through. This is not food security. Lining up at a charity for a basic human right is not food security.

People need income. Government needs to rapidly increase income assistance to match the Market Basket Measure. Income assistance needs to be indexed to inflation. These are the policy-based changes that in our minds will make a meaningful difference.

Nova Scotians want long-term solutions that address the root causes of food insecurity - our surveys indicate that time and time again. They don't want a social safety net precariously propped up by multiple resource-strapped charities. In a recent survey that Feed Nova Scotia conducted among the general public, 82 per cent of respondents agreed provincial income support should be increased and 86 per cent agreed income support should be indexed for inflation. More than 90 per cent believed that income support should be increased by \$1,000 per year or more.

There's a deep cruelty in leaving thousands of Nova Scotians on income assistance to live a life of damaging poverty, and it's a political choice. Leaving so many Nova Scotians continuously waiting for that life raft is a political choice. It's time to choose a different way forward. Better is possible. Raise income assistance rates to match the Market Basket Measure, and index them to inflation. Let's be a province that leads with dignity. Let's be a province that takes care of everyone.

THE CHAIR: Ms. Carter.

CHRISTINA CARTER: Thank you for the invitation to come and speak. Chebucto Connections is a grassroots non-profit serving the Spryfield/Sambro Loop area, located in the heart of the lower-income Spryfield neighbourhood. As a community hub, we work with our partners to connect people to the resources that they may need in one spot. Our programming and services are not only inclusive, but also low barrier to support people to access what they need to move forward and improve their overall health and well-being. However, our work is getting tougher every day with the rising cost of living.

Last week alone, we had a single parent diagnosed with cancer, their EI benefits ran out, and they had to wait 30 days after their last EI payment to apply for social assistance, forcing them into rental arrears and receiving an eviction notice. Another person who recently became homeless was evicted for letting other folks couch surf at their home. A senior with health issues is contemplating assisted suicide because they just don't see

another way out of the struggle. These are not unique stories, but I do believe there's hope and a way to make meaningful change.

I know that when we invest in people and take care of one another, we all benefit. Some examples: 12 years ago, the graduation rate at J.L. Ilesley High School was 55 per cent. Chebucto Connections received money from Pathways to Education Canada to open the program up in Spryfield. Graduation rates now are 85 to 89 per cent. We invest in the youth by providing them with the tools needed, help break down financial barriers, and they have stepped up to the occasion. Now, 73 per cent of our Pathways participants successfully go on to post-secondary education.

I, myself, was a mom at 16, working a minimum wage job subsidized by social assistance. I struggled every day for the basic necessities, like housing and food. I was in survival mode just trying to keep my head above water. I had no time to invest in myself, and then I got into housing and my life changed. My rent was geared to my income, so I was able to pay for the basic needs. I wasn't just in survival mode anymore. Rent geared to income allowed me to have time to invest in myself.

And then we have COVID-19. When that hit, things happened quickly on all levels because we were in a crisis, and everyone on all levels went into action to ensure the safety of others. Well, we're in a crisis - a housing crisis. It's time to make meaningful change and invest in people. It's been proven to work. I just gave three solid examples of how it can and does. Having a roof you can afford is the first step in allowing people to invest in themselves.

My dad always said: Don't come with a problem if you ain't got no solution. (Laughter) So, here are my recommendations: extend the rental cap until more rent-geared-to-income homes are built; decrease the gap between low income cut-offs and the Market Basket Measure; end the clawback on EI payments off social assistance payments; and follow recommendations made by the Minimum Wage Review Committee and raise it to \$14.50 per hour by April 1, 2023, and \$15 by October 1, 2023.

With that, thank you again for allowing me to speak, and happy to answer any questions.

THE CHAIR: Ms. Saulnier.

CHRISTINE SAULNIER: Thank you very much for the opportunity to be here today. As I outlined in my written submission, the impact of the cost of living is not just about what people can buy. It's a significant barrier for many Nova Scotians to reach their full potential, including newcomers to our province.

What I outline in my submission is how the cost-of-living pressures that are being experienced right now spotlight the long-term struggles in this province facing all those

who have actually been made vulnerable by the holes in our social safety net. My main message is that the government needs to plug those holes permanently to ensure no one is left behind, and to address the pandemic fallout.

[10:15 a.m.]

Those struggling with these cost increases are made vulnerable because of inadequate and underfunded public systems, and by the design of our public policy. As I outline, these include students, low-wage workers, people on income assistance, all those living in poverty - everyone who can least absorb or offset price increases.

As for workers, they've been running in place for a very long time, struggling to make ends meet even during decades when inflation was relatively low. This is how we reward people for their efforts. People deserve to get ahead, and right now, the average worker is falling behind at least by 3.4 per cent. Comparing October to October, weekly wages were up 4.3 per cent; inflation up 7.7 per cent. Meanwhile, CEO compensations skyrocketed by 26 per cent.

The inflation story right now is one of inequality. It is not about workers' wages that are causing the current high inflation. It is not about too much money chasing too few goods. There are specific areas of the economy that are seeing price increases - notably energy at 23.7 per cent, and of course food, shelter, and transportation. This story of inflation is supply-side disruptions, pandemic, distortions, profiteering, price gouging, and inequality.

Under these cost increases, those living in poverty are having to make impossible budgetary decisions. Nova Scotia has the highest provincial poverty rate in the country at 9.8 per cent, tied with B.C. In fact, it has the highest or is tied for the highest provincial poverty rate for individuals living alone, children, working age, and young adults. Those most vulnerable to the cost of living crisis are those in the deepest poverty, those who are turning to our government for support as a last resort, those on Employment Support and Income Assistance.

Current total income supports are far below the poverty line of the Market Basket Measure. In fact, Nova Scotia has some of the stingiest income support packages in the country. With the lowest amount for a single parent with one child, we provide only 62 per cent of the poverty line. If you're an individual deemed employable, you get 35 per cent of the poverty line. That's about \$700 a month. The amount provided, adjusted for inflation, for the individual is less than in 1989.

Persons with disabilities only get 48 per cent of the poverty line. Like all the others, everyone on ESIA has been living in deep poverty for the last 20 years. This system is designed to ensure that people struggle to afford the basics. As I outline in my written submission, understanding the impact of the cost of living requires an intersectional



approach. While there has been some modest wage growth, that is uneven. When you dig into the numbers, you see that that wage growth is concentrated in higher-paying jobs and has benefited, for example, men more than women.

It's the same with poverty rates. Poverty rates are higher for refugees and new immigrants, racialized people, persons with disabilities, non-binary and transgendered persons, and Indigenous people. According to the census, in Nova Scotia, 48 per cent of non-permanent residents in our province are living in poverty, and 23 per cent of recent immigrants - those who arrived here between 2016 and 2021. Compare that to the 8.5 per cent poverty rate for non-immigrants. The poverty rate for racialized persons is three times higher: 23 per cent versus 8 per cent.

What can be done? I certainly outline in the written submission a number of suggestions and recommendations via legislative measures and investments to address both the cost side as well as the income side. I outline how to protect vulnerable Nova Scotians and plug those holes. You must properly fund and redesign income support, and other public programs and services. Make them adequate and accessible to more people, including non-permanent residents who are coming to our province.

I'm happy to answer questions and elaborate any of those recommendations.

THE CHAIR: Ms. Roberts.

LISA ROBERTS: Thank you for this opportunity to present. Nourish Nova Scotia is a charitable non-profit established in 2013 with support from the Province of Nova Scotia to promote and support healthy food initiatives that provide Nova Scotian children and youth with the opportunity to eat well and learn well.

I speak as the executive director of an organization that works alongside food champions who see the importance of food access and food enjoyment and food literacy for inclusive education. To learn well and feel well and supported, students need to not be hungry and they need to not be stigmatized. Students arrive at school hungry or get hungry while at school for many reasons: early bus rides, rushing parents, guardians who work shifts, and inadequate household income, to name a few.

When grownups are sent to an all-day conference for their work, typically the organizers provide snacks and lunch. School is the work of children. The days are long, and they should have access to food. Regardless of why children and youth are hungry at school, we should ensure that they have access to food so that they can learn. At schools and in communities, we should work together to celebrate food, to enjoy food, to support local food and connections with agriculture, and to learn to prepare and share food and welcome.

School food programs have been affected by the rising cost of food, both because more students are seeking access to food at school, and because school food budgets don't go as far as they used to. COVID-19 had already weakened universal breakfast programs, which Nourish Nova Scotia played a significant role in fostering since we were established in 2013.

The Auditor General's report, *Healthy Eating in Schools*, released four months ago, noted that breakfast programs generally serve healthy food. That is true, but many schools that used to provide hard-boiled eggs and cut fruit, for example, moved to relying on packaged granola bars and yogurt tubes during COVID-19 when volunteers were scarce and classes were being kept apart, so that children were eating in their classrooms. Those prepackaged breakfast foods are relatively expensive and relatively less nutritious, and in many schools, volunteers are still in short supply and those prepackaged snacks are still the norm.

The publicly-funded school food budget in Nova Scotia amounts to about \$20 per student per school year. That is not enough for a robust breakfast program, let alone lunch. We at Nourish Nova Scotia work with national charitable organizations and established the Nova Scotia School Food Fund ourselves this past Fall to try to top up those budgets. More importantly, Nourish Nova Scotia was a founding member of the Coalition for Healthy School Food, which now has more than 230 non-profit members in every province and territory.

Today, Canada remains the only G7 country without a national school food program, but after federal campaign commitments by both the Liberal Party and NDP in 2021, consultations began on a pan-Canadian school food policy last Fall, and we are hopeful that there will be a significant federal budget commitment in the 2023 budget.

School food programs have the potential to improve children's lives, to strengthen communities, and to transform food systems. The Coalition for Healthy School Food used research to arrive at guiding principles based on best practices that can ensure that these school food programs live up to their potential.

The guiding principle that is perhaps most relevant for today's discussion at this committee is universality. School food programs work best when all students can access them. Ideally, we want to move from universal access toward universal participation. Research has documented that targeted approaches to food charity cause harm. Targeted approaches can end up missing the intended beneficiaries. In short, if we want to address hunger in school, we need to feed everyone.

There are ways, such as pay-what-you-can programs where accounts are topped up in ways not visible to students in line at a cafeteria, where universal programs can be cost-shared with families. We can learn from the experiences of the PEI School Food Program and the School Lunch Association in Newfoundland and Labrador.

But to be clear, school food won't solve poverty or food insecurity. It will help students and families, and address hunger that blocks academic potential. It can also help to create a welcoming culture in school. To address poverty and food insecurity systematically, we need increases to income, including increased minimum wages and income assistance rates.

To speak just a little further to minimum wage, across Nova Scotia, food service workers in school cafeterias don't make much more than that. They work limited hours for far less than a living wage. Many are under pressure to turn a profit, which they may do by selling relatively cheap, non-nutritious food in order to secure their own jobs. To achieve the school food programs that Nova Scotian children and youth deserve, those workers need to be valued, supported, and invested in, both with professional development, and with adequate wages.

Thank you. I welcome any questions.

THE CHAIR: Thank you very much for your remarks. At this point, we're going to move into the question phase of the committee. I just want to remind everybody to wait until your microphone is red and I acknowledge you for speaking so that Legislative Television can pick us up. Also, due to the number of witnesses here today, I'd ask committee members to perhaps direct whom it is you're asking the question of so that we can get everybody to the right person.

At this point, I will pass the floor over to the Liberal caucus for the first 20 minutes. MLA Jessome.

HON. BEN JESSOME: Folks, thanks for your presentations and your time this morning. Directed at Mr. Jennery, you - and perhaps others - referenced the concept of meeting the Market Basket Measure with respect to income assistance. Can you give the committee a description of how that threshold is identified, and perhaps some of the gaps that presently exist to try to get to what the basic Market Basket Measure is, please?

NICK JENNERY: I'm not an expert on this, but the Market Basket Measure as we understand it is a generally accepted level of the poverty line. You use that as a baseline, and measure how many people are below it. There are a lot of people below that. The biggest concern is that as inflation continues to ramp forward, that just pushes more and more people below that Market Basket Measure line, or the poverty line. In actual fact, the trends are going the wrong way. We're pushing more people into poverty, and we're pushing them deeper into poverty. We use that Market Basket Measure as a recommendation for the government to use as a target.

So how do we get people there? Clearly, it's a big number to do it all in one shot, but what's the plan to get there? While you're doing that, can we figure out a way to index

the support that's currently in place, so that at least we stop pushing people deeper into poverty while all this work is under way?

BEN JESSOME: To Ms. Carter, thanks for being here. We've heard several of the witnesses talk about some of the targeted funding that's been made available by the government in the past couple of years. Can you talk a little bit about the impact on some of your clients that you've seen, and whether or not those - what we believe to be minor increases or minor supplements for selective Nova Scotians - have you seen those initiatives translate to positive support for the community that you represent?

CHRISTINA CARTER: An example, I guess, would be with the \$250 one-time payment that people on social assistance received in December. It was nice; people enjoyed it, but they spent it just like that. They're not saving \$250 over 12 months. So they get that cheque and go buy their food. I'm sure everybody's gone to the grocery store. That doesn't even buy you that much today - and it's over. It helps for a day or two, and then they're right back in the same situation. They really need to raise monthly income assistance payments so that people have something to depend on.

[10:30 a.m.]

Another thing that I would like to say while I have the floor is around the clawback on EI payments - it's really having a negative effect on a lot of individuals. An example is a gentleman who has some disabilities, but he has a crossing guard job. He gets laid off in the Summer months. While he's working, he gets to keep the first \$350, and 75 per cent for every dollar after that, and so on and so forth.

During the Summer months, when they get laid off, they have to apply for unemployment, and then dollar for dollar gets taken off. That is a huge decrease in their monthly pay, and a lot of the time they end up going into arrears in their rent, and once that happens they get evicted, and now they're homeless. We need to do better in that sense. The whole point of employment insurance is so that they're insured, and the whole point of social assistance is to help people out in their time of need.

We need that gentleman to still be a crossing guard come September so that it ensures that our children are safe crossing the street. If we force that person to go get another job, then who's going to do the crossing guard job? We need to do better, and I think that should really be under consideration.

BEN JESSOME: That situation with that individual that you referenced, I think it highlights the ask that we've been trying to push, having to do with sustainable, meaningful changes that people can rely on.

It struck me in the last couple of sittings, as we've gone through various Question Periods and posed questions to government ministers related to income assistance and to

sustained support, it feels like only when folks hit their rock bottom that the government will step in and do the right thing. It strikes me as an opportunity for them to create some positive PR to say that they are actively doing something, when in fact there needs to be a more lucrative, reliable source of income, as we've talked about.

Ms. Saulnier, I appreciate your comments. It was very thorough. I'll have to go back to it and certainly review some of it. One element of your submission that struck me was focusing on - and you've used the word "stingiest" in terms of the income support packages that our Province provides in terms of its comparison throughout the country. We've become identified as the most significant in the country, and not in a good fashion in a number of ways.

I'm wondering, if there were a couple of initiatives to pair together - you can't do everything at once, because I know that there's work going on. Assuming that there are a couple of things that could be prioritized at a given moment, what are a couple of things that you would identify as priorities to try and create this more reliable scenario for income assistance recipients?

CHRISTINE SAULNIER: In terms of income assistance, I think everybody here has underlined that the base support itself needs to increase substantively, and using the Market Basket Measure as a baseline is an effective idea. What I have suggested is looking at the full package. This isn't just income assistance. This is also the Nova Scotia Child Benefit. It is the Nova Scotia Affordable Living Tax Credit, which is the mechanism by which we actually are supposed to use it against the HST, which is a flat tax for everybody. You don't pay a different tax if you're on low income and you go to the grocery store. The Affordable Living Tax Credit in and of itself is an excellent mechanism at this time to be able to help people facing the cost of living pressures.

It is the entire package of income supports that we could be using. We have the mechanisms in place. The income assistance system, as others have underlined, is itself designed in a way that we would need to redesign. We can't be doing what we're doing to people in terms of transitioning and supporting them, if they do find work. All of those things need to be addressed, but in terms of the income itself, we do have mechanisms and we could be putting a package together.

The Nova Scotia Child Benefit is the other example. I think using all of those to support the people who have the highest poverty rates in this province, and who are the ones who are going to government for support, that's what we can do - and we need to do.

BEN JESSOME: That complements what Ms. Roberts referenced. The targeted specific funding streams that are out there are often perhaps harmful in terms of actually moving people from the situation that they're in.

Perhaps I'll skip to Deputy Minister Taweel. I want to talk a little bit about the affordability of housing. You've referenced a pending initiative to be announced as it pertains to rent supplements. Having been on the government side of the House for several years, we regularly accepted criticism - or took criticism, I should say - as it pertains to rent supplements from now-government members, and it seems to be a tool that now-government members are supportive of.

In listening to information coming in from across the country - and that of here in Nova Scotia - we know that the rent supplement situation is not going to be enough. So how is your department working with the Department of Municipal Affairs and Housing to create what was earlier referenced by Ms. Carter? We need programs where rent is geared to income. Those types of houses need to be built rather than rent supplements being the sole reliable program for vulnerable Nova Scotians.

TRACEY TAWHEEL: In my opening remarks, yes, I did reference a change coming to the rent supplement program. That change will ensure that individuals in receipt of income assistance - that the amount that they receive by way of a rent supplement will increase. When the Standard Household Rate came into effect, the rent supplement program was not adjusted to reflect the change in the Standard Household Rate. That change is being implemented now, and in late Winter, it will result in income assistance recipients who are in receipt of rent supplements receiving anywhere between \$200 to \$300 more per month to support them with their shelter costs. I think that is a change that will have a significant impact on approximately 2,000 income assistance recipients.

Beyond that, the rent supplement program, which, as you've referenced, is administered through the Department of Municipal Affairs and Housing - work is under way to look at that overall program. We work very collaboratively with our colleagues in that department. I know they are working with community and other partners to look at the most effective way to utilize that program, to ensure that those who need support receive that support and that the program is geared toward the current environment that we find ourselves in, from a rent perspective.

BEN JESSOME: Thank you, deputy minister. You have a tremendously difficult job. I know that you're very willing and considerate to do the right things for your department and the people it serves.

To ask a difficult question, perhaps - you've been at the helm for some time, through successive governments. We hear comments from our folks in the remainder of the panel as it pertains to some of the initiatives that have taken place, that they're just not cutting it. From your perspective, what sort of meaningful changes have you seen over your time? Can you tell us a little bit about what you've experienced? Oftentimes we perhaps hear one side of it. If you can speak to the broader picture, I guess, I'd be happy to hear some of that as well.

TRACEY TAWHEEL: Certainly, I have been the deputy minister of this department and a deputy minister in government, for quite some time now. I would say that every government works very hard to make change and best support the clients government is tasked with serving. All of that work is held in balance. There are needs across all systems.

We're here today talking about our social assistance system and the social safety net that exists within this province, and we are at a very unique point in time - as all of my colleagues here today who are serving as witnesses have outlined. There are considerable challenges affecting vulnerable Nova Scotians, the likes of which we probably haven't seen. It's a bit of a perfect storm that has come together, if you will: COVID-19, the cost of living, and the challenges brought on by climate change. It is certainly a complex environment within which we are operating.

But I would say without hesitation that - regardless of the government that is in power or the individuals who occupy chairs - every MLA, every minister, every Premier works very hard to serve those who they've been elected to serve. Our job within the bureaucracy is to raise issues and to advocate for those who we serve, understanding that there are various levers across a variety of departments. I think being here today is an opportunity for some of the programs that the Department of Community Services is privileged to administer - to shine a spotlight on those programs.

I would be remiss if I did not take this opportunity to make sure it is clear that it is not within the sole discretion of the Department of Community Services. There are levers that exist right across government. The commitment of all of those ministers and all of those deputy ministers and all of the talented individuals who work in all of those departments to try to better the situation for vulnerable Nova Scotians - that is the key. It is not just the programs that the Department of Community Services is privileged to administer. It is all of those levers being pulled and coming together.

Again, we do need to strike a balance. There are a variety of needs and demands placed on government all the time. Everyone in this room well understands that, and I think collectively, we all work very hard to make sure that those needs are held in balance and met as adequately as possible.

THE CHAIR: MLA Nicoll, you have until 10:47 a.m.

LORELEI NICOLL: Because I'll be watching my watch, for sure. Thank you, everyone; it's nice to see you. I acknowledge my friend Sylvia back there - nice to see you, and wearing a different hat, once again. I appreciate everyone who's here today and giving your involvement and your responses to the crisis because, sadly, they are responses to what is going on.

I appreciate your comments, Ms. Taweel, but it must be difficult to sit there and listen to people, needing to respond to things that are happening, when there needs to be a

redesign of how we're doing things as Christine Saulnier said. You said everyone is toward the same goal, and these are extraordinary circumstances. Those have all been acknowledged, and they're acknowledged by everyone around the table, but it is critical to sort of look at this holistically. We all seem to acknowledge that income is the primary root cause to a lot of the reasons why they are responding to those needs here.

[10:45 a.m.]

We know the rent cap is going to expire, so the supplemental rent program that you spoke of is the solution, as you feel it is needed for - and support over 2,000 clients, as you mentioned . . .

THE CHAIR: Order. Sorry. The time for the Liberal caucus questions has ceased, so we will now move on. MLA Hansen.

SUZY HANSEN: Thank you so much for the presentation, as well for the valuable information.

I'm just going to get down to it. Really, what we've heard today is that we need solid investments, we need to plug holes permanently, the ESIA has been in deep poverty for 20 years. I hear permanent a lot of the time, and I want to say to the department: Income assistance rates are set so low that people who live on income assistance are thousands of dollars below the poverty line. I know when we talked about the eradication of poverty on October 17<sup>th</sup>, there was a declaration that this minister in particular was going to help to eradicate poverty. This is an opportunity right now to be able to do just that.

Because I know you've spoken of investments and rebates, and all of the wonderful pieces that you're able to do based on the reactions that are necessary right now, has the minister asked your department to implement permanent raised income assistance rates as of this term that we've been sitting?

TRACEY TAWHEEL: As the member and all members would be aware, any increase to income assistance would be managed through the budget process, and that is how any increase to any program in government is managed.

SUZY HANSEN: I did notice that there was no raise in the budget for any permanent funding for that, so I'm glad that you mentioned that. I will bring that up in the budget session.

I want to say that other provinces have begun to index income assistance rates to inflation. When we sit next, during our budget session, that will be one of the questions that we will ask. How confident do you feel that this might be something that your department does moving forward, if that is the direction that we would go in, and how soon do you think?



TRACEY TAWHEEL: Similar to my previous response, any decision around indexing or any changes to income assistance rates would be handled through the budget process. That would be a decision made by government.

SUZY HANSEN: Thank you again, deputy minister, and I'm really glad that we have this opportunity to chat about these things. We have a number of us sitting here who will be talking about this and I hope that this presentation just rang some bells. As you said, this is a unique point in time, but the volcano has erupted. There have been a number of issues and the layers of this cost of living crisis has happened is a number of departments, like you said, that need to be working with each other and connecting with each other. Some of these investments that are being put forward are not permanent and they are not sustainable. We need to make sure that is something that will be done when we sit next. I just wanted to say that out loud so we're all very aware that these will be questions and things that will come up in our next sitting.

My next question is to Nourish Nova Scotia. In 2020, 19 per cent of people under 18 were food insecure. This number has more than likely risen due to food inflation since then. We know that a school food program is essential in its own right. It cannot substitute prolonged inaction on family income inadequacy - and you spoke to that. With that said, Ms. Roberts, can you explain where we are with developing a free school lunch program in Nova Scotia? As you mentioned, universally it needs to be completed.

LISA ROBERTS: Right now, in Nova Scotia, school lunch programs are not funded on a systemic level provincially. What we saw in the Auditor General's report - and at around the same time a report was released on school healthy eating programs by Public Health - is that there's a demand and there's a need for lunch. In the South Shore Regional Centre for Education, there's widespread provision of lunch, and there is a non-profit organization that fundraises to make it possible for all students to eat, I understand, in a fashion that doesn't stigmatize the students who need that support.

Really, school food in Nova Scotia is extremely varied, even though it's been a number of years since the regional centres for education came under the department. Effectively, there's really significant variation in the way school food is delivered, in who is running cafeterias. There's some consistency in terms of breakfast, but in Halifax, more than half of the schools don't have cafeterias. We're also hearing that there are cafeterias where no third-party provider has responded to the request for proposals, so there are a couple of junior high schools that have cafeterias, but nobody is operating them.

In some regions, the cafeterias are being managed by the regional centre for education. That is entirely the case in the South Shore, which has been able to make some really great strides. It's the case in many but not all of the schools in the Annapolis Valley Regional Centre for Education, and in the Tri-County Regional Centre for Education; most of the schools are being managed by the regional centre for education. When the budgets are managed at a regional level, there are ways to manage school food such that a school

doesn't end up with less provision because it's got a small population and it can't make money with its cafeteria. That's why you need to have a more systemic approach to it - so that you're managing the budget and then seeking the investment.

I'd say we are really hopeful that there will be a very significant federal investment, but then it also needs to be matched at a provincial level, with a willingness to engage with the community assets, invest in those food service workers who are serving students and can and should be supported to make healthy food. Maybe even be engaged in the education system, so that we're using an investment in school food to also improve food literacy or entrepreneurship training.

There's so much good stuff that can be done with school food. There have been very successful pilots in a number of regions, but a lot of the work is yet to be done.

SUZY HANSEN: I'll pass it over to my colleague in a second, but I just want to say that I'm glad to hear that it's a collaboration. It's a piece where there are different levels that need to work together in order to do that work. I think that's valuable even in the sense of what we're talking about today - the impact of the cost of living crisis on vulnerable Nova Scotians and those living on income assistance.

Income assistance right now is the forefront. How are folks able to make ends meet if they don't make enough money or they don't receive enough money and they can't make enough money to be able to do that together? This is why the service providers are here telling us these are necessary recommendations - that these are things we need to see in order to help us do our work in a well-rounded way where our staff isn't burned out and our employees aren't exhausted, because we're doing a lot of this work to help folks at least not struggle as much.

I want to thank you again for the information. We will definitely be bringing this forward. Gary will be speaking.

THE CHAIR: MLA Burrill.

GARY BURRILL: Mr. Jennery, I am moved by the power of this phrase you have brought - that the current levels of income assistance are a "deep cruelty."

I want to ask you, when thinking about all those who are served through the member organizations of Feed Nova Scotia, would you speak to what kind of difference it would make in people's lives if Nova Scotia were to say: No, we're not doing this anymore. We are, in fact, going to move to the Market Basket Measure. We are going to take this step, as Feed Nova Scotia and others have called for.

What would be the changes in the lives of the people your organization serves, that that would open the door to?

NICK JENNERY: The short answer is that it would be profound, and it would be relatively immediate. If I think about the Christmas season that we've just come through, we had our, quote: largest Christmas program ever. That's not one to celebrate. That's over 20,000 people who reached out to us for help at Christmastime for food.

We had to have a trauma counsellor on site to help staff navigate the conversations with over 20,000 people. What typifies this last year versus previous years is that there are always people in high anxiety, but there's an element of fear as well as the anxiety - fear because of all the things that we've talked about: the unknowns, a potential recession, the rising cost of food, et cetera. By far and away, those conversations end with a note of gratitude: Thank you for providing support. This allows me to invite family over for a meal, where I haven't been able to do that. There are countless stories of how just providing in that one occasion dinner to put on the table, the impact that it has.

When you give people the opportunity to buy food, to choose the foods that they need when they need them, you change their lives. You change their lives in many different ways. We've seen neighbours get to know neighbours in an apartment building because a barter system suddenly springs up organically when people have food and they can buy food: I'll swap my detergent for maybe your cereal, et cetera.

We took a number of clients involved in the pilot to the Department of Community Services when we looked at this joint pilot that we did. What we heard were stories of families coming together. If you give people the ability to put food on the table without forcing them to choose whether they pay their bills or pay their rent, then what you obviously do is increase their self esteem, increase conversation. A lot of good things happen.

To get to your question, if we could move down that road through some program - through some policy change that gives people more disposable income, the impact would be significant. We actually had evidence of that in recent times, when you look at the times of the Canada Emergency Response Benefit. When CERB was available, that was the only time that we saw the number of people looking for assistance at food banks actually decreasing.

GARY BURRILL: Thank you. I would like, Ms. Saulnier, to ask you a related question about the minimum wage. We have the recommendation now from the Minimum Wage Review Committee about a fast-tracked path to \$15, and about a new formula - counting the Consumer Price Index, plus 1 per cent - as a way of moving ahead of where we are at the moment. Can you comment on the significance from your point of view of that recommendation in this moment around minimum wage?

CHRISTINE SAULNIER: Absolutely. We should already be at a \$15 minimum wage. It's important that we move as quickly as possible to that place, given where we are in terms of the cost of living. As I have outlined, by the time we reach it according to the

government's plan, the \$15 will be worth just under \$11. That's the reality of the impact of inflation.

[11:00 a.m.]

Given our work on the living wage, what that work has outlined is not just the cost of living - which we've been doing for six years now in showing that - it is showing what is required to support people to be able to afford the basics and have a small cushion which is critical. That's the critical piece. None of what's happening right now should be described as extraordinary or unique.

If we had put in place and learned lessons from, say, SARS, from the evidence around the climate crisis for decades and decades, for what we've been saying - and many for decades and decades - around underinvestment in housing, especially in non-market housing, none of that is a surprise. That's what the social safety net is supposed to do, and part of government's obligation is to ensure that people have enough.

The minimum wage is that protection for low wage workers. It needs to move to \$15 immediately, and according to the formula - it's an important formula - it will be indexed to inflation, plus the 1 per cent. Again, this is how we reward those workers who we called heroes who are continuing to provide essential services, and who have been undervalued. It's critical.

GARY BURRILL: Further to that, one of the things we don't have at the moment in the government's work on this area is any kind of a pathway or trajectory toward a living wage. We have this very significant, troubling gap between the minimum wage and the living wage. In the context of all that's been said about income inadequacy, could you speak to the significance of that gap?

CHRISTINE SAULNIER: The work on the living wage is designed in a way that shows that this isn't just employers. This isn't entirely on the shoulders of employers to pay that living wage. We need to get it to a place where we shift and think about that social wage.

The way to decrease that gap is absolutely to increase wages. That is a critical piece of that. But if we don't think that employers can get to the \$23.50, which is the living wage in Halifax, then government has a role to play. That role is on the income side, as I've outlined - whether through the Affordable Living Tax Credit or more supports for the Nova Scotia Child Benefit, or other ways - but it's also on the cost side. Ensuring that people are paying less out of pocket for health care, as an example. Addressing Pharmacare, making sure that people can afford their drugs. Extending child care so that more people get access to the more affordable child care plan that exists. All of those things that can be done on both of those sides is how we decrease that gap.

Again, we're not just calling for that to be the minimum protection, though we do need a road to ensure that people have enough. That measure of income isn't just the hourly wage - it's that annual income that we calculate and how we get there. We've outlined how.

GARY BURRILL: Mr. Jennery, I'd like to go back to Feed Nova Scotia's most recent report to the community, with the interesting recommendation that something be done about Pharmacare premiums. Because of the experience Feed Nova Scotia has with the overlap between Pharmacare and drug payments, and people's ability to buy food, would you speak to why it is that Feed Nova Scotia has made this recommendation?

NICK JENNERY: We obviously try to be client-centric in everything that we do. That obligates us to understand why people are going to food banks, shelters, meal programs, drop-in centres. We survey them on a regular basis, and they willingly provide that information.

Four months ago, when we did our recent survey, almost 50 per cent of people who were receiving support from food banks - 46 per cent, specifically - said that they did not fill their medical prescription. What's the impact of that? It's obviously significant. Nearly 50 per cent are not getting the medications that they are being prescribed.

So what can you do about it? It's a cost thing. What we're talking about here, about indexing income assistance and raising income assistance - those are very big numbers and I appreciate that. But my sense is that if we could find a way to reduce the co-pay for prescription drugs, what you're doing is potentially taking away that awful choice - do I put food on the table to feed my family or do I get the medications that my doctor says that I need?

My sense is that we could do that as a province, relatively quickly, given the other initiatives we're talking about. My sense is that it would have an immediate impact.

THE CHAIR: Order. The time for the NDP caucus' questions has expired. We will now move over to the Progressive Conservative caucus with MLA White.

JOHN WHITE: Deputy Minister Taweel, we understand that living in poverty is often generational. Can you describe what supports and resources are available to assist vulnerable youth to build their skill set and confidence as they achieve success as they transition into the workforce?

TRACEY TAWHEEL: Yes, certainly poverty is often intergenerational. Some of the programs that we offer through the Department of Community Services aim to support individuals and their families by providing different programs and services that seek to break that cycle of poverty, principally using a variety of wraparound supports - financial supports and customized interventions - that can help meet the unique needs of those individuals.

Perhaps I'll give you a couple of examples. The committee may be familiar with our EDGE program, which supports youth aged 18 to 26. It provides wraparound employment support delivered through an innovative one-door approach. It features peer groups, individualized counselling, and mental health support, as well as job search and readiness training. It is provided to young adults who are on the ESIA caseload.

This program was a first of its kind in Nova Scotia. It was designed in part by young adults and those whom it serves, and I think this is why it's been so successful. The principal goal of the program is to help those individuals enrolled to develop the skills and, importantly, the confidence that they need to enter the workforce, be that on a part-time basis or moving to a full-time basis. It also helps to build community connections, so that individuals don't feel quite so isolated, and provides peer support and mentorship as well.

Another example would be our Educate to Work for Dependents of ESIA Clients program. This program supports dependents of individuals who are on income assistance by covering half of the cost of tuition and 100 per cent of the cost of books and fees and health and dental for dependents who would like to pursue further education through the Nova Scotia Community College.

There are a number of other programs that the department offers, all with the goal of trying to interrupt that intergenerational cycle of poverty. They do see tremendous amounts of success.

JOHN WHITE: Are you able to speak a little bit about the earned-income exemption and how it's able to help income assistance clients to transition to the workforce?

TRACEY TAWHEEL: I believe one of my colleagues at the table here, Ms. Carter, spoke to the earned-income exemption at a high level, using a client example. We do have an earned-income exemption pathway, if you will, for individuals who are on the income assistance caseload. The goal of our earned-income exemption program is to encourage individuals to enter the workforce in a way that makes sense for them, and also ensure they continue to receive income assistance support while they need to receive that support. It allows individuals to get some support to enter the workforce, begin earning wages while still being in receipt of a level of income assistance and some of the other benefits that are provided in addition to financial benefits.

The income exemption system is a tiered system. Recipients earning income see smaller reductions to their financial assistance based on their level of earnings. For general employment, what that means is that clients keep the first \$250 of their earned net wages before they see any reduction to their income assistance benefit. Supported employment is also available for clients who are employed but whose physical, mental, or cognitive abilities prevent them from working without continuous wraparound support. Those

recipients keep the first \$350 of their earned net wages before they see any reduction in their income assistance benefits.

These exemptions allow individuals on the income assistance caseload to increase their income and bring greater stability to either their individual circumstance or their family's circumstance. We work to support hopefully the easing off of income assistance over the longer term into full-time work, which will help to stabilize their personal and family situations.

JOHN WHITE: My next question is for Mr. Jennery. Food banks are a vital resource for vulnerable Nova Scotians. Can you share with us some information about the Feed Nova Scotia network, such as how many food banks are served through the network, and how resources are allocated across the province?

NICK JENNERY: We support a network of 140 food banks, shelters, meal programs, and drop-in centres. It's not a clear definition of when a food bank is not a food bank, because many of them are innovating right now, they're evolving, particularly with wraparound services.

In general, if you think of it that we support 75 food banks around the province. We obligate those food banks to use a common IT system whereby clients get registered, and that information gets aggregated up. At any one time, we understand what the system is supporting in terms of total clients.

We provide that network with about \$1.2 million worth of food each and every month. That's over \$1 million of food that you have to find and/or buy, sort it out, check it over, put it together, and get it out the door each and every day. Each and every day, about 20,000 pounds of food leaves our premises at Wright Avenue to deliver that food. We also rescue food along the way.

In addition to food that we provide food banks and the shelters and meal programs, we also provide funds and programming. The \$3 million that Deputy Minister Taweel mentioned in her opening comments - \$1 million came to Feed Nova Scotia. We opted to distribute that 100 per cent to all of those organizations. What that means is that we know the number of clients that are supported by each food bank, at each shelter, et cetera, so there's a proportional distribution.

The impact of that is that the three largest food banks in the province will get \$25,000, the smallest get \$5,000. It's very appreciative and significant, for sure, but to a comment that my colleague made, you can burn through that really quickly and then you're back to where you were again. It's a combination of food programming support and financial support that we provide.

JOHN WHITE: Mr. Jennery, how much money has Feed Nova Scotia received from the provincial government in the last two years?

[11:15 a.m.]

NICK JENNERY: There are three notable occasions that the provincial government took initiative that were warmly appreciated. The first one was during the pandemic, where they provided money to allow us to set up a home delivery program, something that supported 22,000 Nova Scotians and about 57,000 one-week boxes of food. Significant and immediate.

The second one was during Hurricane Fiona. There was a need for incremental food to get to the hardest-hit communities. That was an incremental cost, so the provincial government provided \$500,000 to help us do that. We distributed most of that to the local agencies where they were supported.

The third one is a recent one that I just talked about, \$1 million to help us manage the cost of living. All of our operating costs are going up. We buy food, we put gas in our trucks, we have incremental costs as well, but the people looking for that food support, some of them are 100 per cent dependent on what we do.

Those are the three major occasions. Again, I would express my appreciation for that, but it is not a long-term solution to the problems we're talking about.

JOHN WHITE: Are you able to tell us how much of that money over the last two years was planned rather than what was considered urgent funding?

NICK JENNERY: Sorry, what was planned?

JOHN WHITE: Are you able to tell us the difference between how much of the funding you received over the last two years was planned money to send to you, as opposed to what was considered urgent funding, such as during COVID-19, as you mentioned?

NICK JENNERY: I'll give you my perspective on it - my colleague here may have one. My perspective was that when the pandemic hit and people were forced and asked to stay at home, and therefore isolated from food support systems, we came together with the Department of Community Services and a consultant to figure out what a province-wide home delivery system would look like. We quickly asked, how much is this going to cost? There was a commitment to get that done, which we did for just over two years before we wound it down in August.

From that standpoint, it was planned. We did not pull the trigger on that program without knowing that the funding was there, because we're talking \$2 million a year over and above everything else, and we didn't have that.



On Hurricane Fiona, I don't think that was planned. We received a cheque and we quickly got it out the door to those agencies, and we used \$100,000 of that to buy food for our own operations.

On the recent \$3 million, I guess from my perspective it wasn't planned. My controller walked out of his door and said, have you seen our current balance right now? We were pleasantly surprised to see that and moved on it. Hopefully that answers your question.

JOHN WHITE: Just before I pass it over to MLA Barkhouse, I have one more question for you, Mr. Jennery. Is there ever an occasion that Feed Nova Scotia will dictate to a food bank how they operate with other organizations in a community?

NICK JENNERY: We don't dictate what they do. We do ask any organization that's part of the network to sign on to a food banking code of ethics, and that is a commitment to treat all clients with respect, with dignity, to have a welcoming environment, et cetera. We ask them to do that.

They have their own boards of directors, they have their own mandates, and we absolutely respect them. We don't tell them how much food they need to give people, or tell them how often they should be open. They determine that based on their ability to support and their assessment of local needs.

THE CHAIR: MLA Barkhouse.

DANIELLE BARKHOUSE: Deputy Minister Taweel, I know that the government made an announcement in December about \$2.6 million towards the 26 family resource centres across the province.

THE CHAIR: MLA Barkhouse, can you just move a little closer to the mic?

DANIELLE BARKHOUSE: I've never had to worry about my voice not being loud enough. (Laughter) Can you speak to how family resource centres help the most vulnerable families throughout Nova Scotia?

TRACEY TAWHEEL: I think at another point in time, when I've been here at the committee as a witness, we've talk about the importance of family resource centres. I can't stress enough the critical role that they play as partners right across this province. The \$2.6 million investment that was announced back in December really will go a long way to supporting those family resource centres and meeting the needs of the families and individuals they serve. They offer a very holistic approach to supporting families, providing everything from parenting supports to guidance peer support. They provide practical things like diapers. They may even also be playing a role in food security for

families to help families connect within their community but also provide them the support they need to remain stabilized in their community.

The \$2.6 million investment that was provided in December was targeted toward the provision of food and other essential items, as I referenced, such as diapers, and also perhaps other holiday items that families might have needed in order to provide a holiday for their children and for themselves.

DANIELLE BARKHOUSE: I couldn't agree more, both as somebody who used one at one point in her life and as somebody who worked with them at one point in her life.

That leaves me Ms. Carter. Thank you for sharing your story. I have some similar history.

Can you tell us a little bit about your vision for Chebucto Connections for the future? We know most of your work is on the eastern Chebucto Peninsula. Has there been any discussion in regard to expanding?

CHRISTINA CARTER: No, and I hope we don't have to. If we have to, that means that more people are struggling. I think we can all agree that what we're trying to do is alleviate that struggle.

We have never really talked about expanding anywhere further than the Spryfield-Sambro Loop area. Like I said, my vision is to hopefully come here and say that fewer people are hungry and fewer people are homeless, and that we can actually make the work sustainable. At this time, it's not sustainable. We don't have the manpower. I shouldn't say manpower. I'm so sorry. (Laughter) We just don't have the people power to continue taking on more. My staff are burned out. It's just not a good state.

DANIELLE BARKHOUSE: I'd like to think that it's all of our visions to see that happen, but right now it's necessary to think of the future and what we're going to do. I had to ask the question.

I'm going to go back to Deputy Minister Taweel. Government has made several recent investments to support income assistance clients as well as low-income earners. Can you speak to these investments and how they will support vulnerable Nova Scotians?

TRACEY TAWHEEL: Yes, government has made a number of investments. The last budget saw a number of investment increases to the Nova Scotia Child Benefit, which has been referenced here today, and almost a \$37 million investment in the Disability Support Program to continue our work to phase out large congregate settings and to uncap the Independent Living Support program to support individuals to live more independently, as well as investments in supporting families who have children with disabilities.

In addition to that, the last budget provided almost \$70 million to be used for new and continued supportive housing initiatives to help ensure individuals' safety and well-being and help to augment the cost of providing harm-reduction services.

Recently, as we've discussed here, there were investments announced in December. There was an additional one-time payment of \$250 to income assistance recipients; full-time foster families received a one-time payment of \$1,000; and in total, \$8.7 million in grants were provided to community partner organizations, including Feed Nova Scotia, family resource centres, and transition houses across the province.

I referenced in my opening remarks the \$100 million effort to help low- and middle-income Nova Scotians with home heating. Not all of those individuals would certainly be on income assistance, but our low- and middle-income earners will certainly benefit from the Heating Assistance Rebate Program increase from \$200 to \$1,000 for this Winter, and households with an income of up to \$85,000 will be eligible for that increase.

THE CHAIR: MLA Barkhouse, you have 30 seconds.

DANIELLE BARKHOUSE: I'll just say thank you for those answers from all of you, and, yes, I've received quite a few phone calls very happy that the government raised the income on that because people were struggling. I just used my 30 seconds up, and on to the next.

THE CHAIR: We will go into the second round of questioning. There'll be five minutes for each caucus to finish up, and I will begin with MLA Nicoll for the Liberal caucus.

LORELEI NICOLL: We as a caucus put multiple bills forward this session focused on housing, including calling on the government to publish a youth housing strategy and to implement a residential tenancies enforcement system to ensure accountability and help prevent situations where tenants are unfairly renocted.

We all agree we need more housing. Everyone has said we're in a housing crisis, but people are in dire straits right now. Housing isn't built overnight, and we don't expect it to be built overnight with the labour shortage.

Specifically on the youth, though, I'd like to ask each of the witnesses, as well as the government: Are we seeing an uptick in youth accessing food banks or community services? You mentioned EDGE earlier, but that was a pilot project which I understand is over, and that was for people who were on ESIA. If you could clarify that, and just ask all of you to give your input. What can we do better to serve our youth in our community who may be or are falling behind?

CHRISTINA CARTER: I feel like with the youth in Spryfield, we support over 300 students there in that area with the Pathways to Education program. One of the things that we do support them with is food support.

If somebody's struggling with food, we will get them vouchers - like, the high school, give them gift cards. We also run a produce pack program where we give out fresh produce, eggs, and bread every two weeks to people struggling in the community, so they have access to that. We feed them at their tutoring sessions from Monday to Thursday, and everything is healthy snacks. If it ain't healthy, it don't come in. (Laughs)

When you invest in them - I've just seen them flourish so much, you know? We actually have alumni that come back to volunteer and give back to the community. We hire them on to work with the youth and be peer mentors, and I think that investing in our youth today will make a difference in tomorrow in preventing this crisis that we're in.

[11:30 a.m.]

LORELEI NICOLL: I know I said to anyone on the committee, including government, so I was expecting for Deputy Minister Taweel to respond as she shook her head. I probably was erroneous in mentioning EDGE, so I just want to ask her.

TRACEY TAWHEEL: EDGE is a permanent program, I'm very happy to say. It's a permanent program. It's a very successful program.

With regard to your question about supports for youth, I couldn't agree more. Investment in youth programming is critical to breaking that intergenerational cycle of poverty, as referenced earlier. I outlined some of the programs that we provide; there are many others. I'd be very happy to brief you maybe outside - not take up so much time here - on all of the programs that are available.

I would say from a caseload perspective, we have not seen an increase on the income assistance caseload from a youth perspective proportionately, and we are not seeing an increase in terms of our supportive housing or our homelessness numbers with regard to youth. I in no way want to suggest that doesn't mean there aren't youth in need. I'm just providing you with our most recent statistics in answer to your question.

THE CHAIR: MLA Nicoll, with about 45 seconds.

LORELEI NICOLL: Again, still putting that plug in for the youth housing strategy, but because of the time limits, I will take you up on that meeting to be more informed because it's difficult as a committee. I often wonder what we're here to do. We hear all the heartbreak, and it's very difficult to sit here. Mr. Jennery pointed that out very quickly - that even the people who are working for you needed to have trauma counselling during this holiday season. I want to acknowledge that and thank them for all that they've done.

Again, to your point of looking for a long-term solution, you had mentioned something with regard to being food secure by growing our own food. You said you were hoping that that could be a program in the future, where you would . . .

THE CHAIR: Order. The time for the Liberal questioning has ended. I will go to MLA Burrill with the NDP caucus.

GARY BURRILL: Mr. Jennery, I'd like to go back again to Feed Nova Scotia's 2022 report to the community. The central headline of that report was: Systems are Broken. Would you offer some explanation - a sense of why this is such a central thought for Feed Nova Scotia?

NICK JENNERY: I think the evidence that the systems are broken is that if I look at all the metrics, pretty much all of them are going in the wrong direction. In a recent survey that we did in September, over half of the people going to food banks say that their need for food support has increased, not decreased. Fifty-five per cent of those going to food banks said they're going to need support again within the next two months. That wasn't always the case three years ago.

We've got 25 per cent more people entering the food bank support system versus last year. Again, going in the wrong direction. We've got 300 new people a week for the first time going to food banks. More working poor are going to food banks. All of these metrics - they're just going in the wrong direction.

I think I would conclude by saying, clearly our current approach to addressing food security is less than effective.

GARY BURRILL: Ms. Saulnier, I want to ask you, with the short time that we have, we know the government is entertaining pre-budget submissions. As we think about all that has been discussed today about income assistance - when we think about income assistance in particular - what is the recommendation the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives would have for the budget?

CHRISTINE SAULNIER: In terms of income assistance, it would be a substantive increase. We're working on our budget submission, so I don't have a number for you, but it needs to be substantive. The other increases need to be in the other income support programs.

The Nova Scotia Affordable Living Tax Credit is a really important mechanism to support people right now. We know the government has the fiscal capacity - that, in fact, they're benefiting from this inflationary pressure through additional revenue. So we will be making recommendations for a substantive increase to income assistance that will get us to that Market Basket Measure in a few years.

GARY BURRILL: Mr. Jennery, would Feed Nova Scotia have a recommendation for the government on the income assistance question for the budget?

NICK JENNERY: I would agree with my colleague, Christine, about a substantial increase in income assistance. Start the indexing process. I think proof has shown that if you increase minimum wage by a dollar, then you lessen the incidence of food insecurity by 5 per cent. If you put another thousand dollars on income assistance, again, you reduce the possibility of food insecurity by 5 per cent.

I think reducing the co-pay requirement for education is lower hanging fruit, relatively speaking, and I would support all of the efforts on providing affordable housing. We know 50 per cent of people going to food banks are spending 50 per cent or more of their income on shelter, and that's not sustainable.

THE CHAIR: We'll move to the Progressive Conservative caucus. MLA Taggart.

TOM TAGGART: I have a question for Mr. Jennery here in a minute, but I have to make a comment over all here. I've sat here today and heard about all these great and greatly needed programs with respect to Feed Nova Scotia and Chebucto Connections - this sort of work in the urban core. I'm very disappointed that I've never yet heard a word said about seniors. This is not just about food security, but this is about the overall need for the people.

I've just got to say before I get to my question, as a very rural MLA who's very passionate about the seniors in our community, I believe that we have a lot to do in all senses of everything we've talked about here today. Every government has for years worked at that, but those programs that we put in place - the Seniors Care Grant and the \$1,000 - reached out and touched a lot of families outside of metro that would not have had it before. I just needed to say that.

I want to make one other comment, I guess, for Mr. Jennery - you can respond to this. I used to deliver from the food bank to rural residents, mostly seniors, unfortunately, in my community. I understand the challenges, and I understand from your earlier comments that it's \$2 million to deliver food across the province; that's an extreme amount of money. I just want you to understand the challenges there are with respect to serving the whole province, as opposed to the urban cores.

Can you share with us how Nova Scotia farmers support Feed Nova Scotia and other food banks around the province, and do they do it voluntarily? Are they paid something - how does that work? Do you mind, sir?

NICK JENNERY: Just working back on your points, we buy a little bit more than \$500,000 worth of food per year from local businesses and local producers - including farmers.

The farmers in addition to that arrangement throughout the year are extraordinarily supportive of what we do, and readily provide food. For the Christmas program, we need 100 farmers' bins of produce alone to make that happen. That comes from the farmers, and in many cases, they help us out by not just delivering those big farmers bins, but they actually package them up. It saves labour on our side. I can't say enough about the farmers, for sure.

We are looking to increase purchases from farmers, as well as maintaining the donation level. We don't want to incur incremental costs, but we think there is room to have an annual agreement, if you will, that provides visibility for both the farmers and ourselves. We need a consistent supply of low-cost, quality food, and they need some certainty that there's a market after they put their products in the ground. We think that we can work toward that.

I think on the seniors and the rural part, I would comment on home delivery. We're seeing the majority of food banks now having some form of home delivery program. Last year, our own volunteers drove 54,000 km on their own ticket, primarily to deliver the food. We are now providing some food banks with gas stipends so that they can help support their volunteers - particularly in the rural areas - to do those deliveries. With seniors, there are some transportation issues, there's disability; I understand it. Home delivery is an expensive option, and we've experienced it through the pandemic as well.

TOM TAGGART: I appreciate that. We have a great food bank out of Truro and another one in Tatamagouche. I appreciate that they delivered locally, but they never delivered outside.

This is a bone of contention with me overall with rural Nova Scotia, and the increased cost of the carbon tax. How do you see that impacting you as an organization with respect to cost of production of food - local food anyway - and your deliveries, that sort of thing?

THE CHAIR: Mr. Jennery, you have about 15 seconds.

NICK JENNERY: I would say we are a registered charity, but we operate very much like a business. We have fleets, we have logistics, transportation, procurement. All of those line item costs that any business has affect us as much as they affect a for-profit business.

THE CHAIR: The time for questioning has ended. If you have some closing remarks, I'd ask that we keep them brief. We do have a little bit of committee business that we need to attend to. I will start on this side with Ms. Roberts.

LISA ROBERTS: Thank you very much for your time and your questions. I'll just end by saying that Nourish Nova Scotia is a resource that's really available for all Nova

Scotians. Our website is full of resources that have been developed for families who want to cook, for children who want to learn food literacy, and for cafeteria workers looking for bulk recipes. We are interested in working with organizations, including organizations that are supported by the Department of Community Services to assist folks who are interested in doing food-related work.

We know from various conversations that almost any organization that is doing work in community - whether it's focused on seniors, whether it's focused on families, whether it's focused on newcomers - almost every non-profit organization in Nova Scotia is in some fashion or other supporting food-related work because of many of the factors that were discussed here at this committee.

CHRISTINE SAULNIER: I'm a researcher who looks at numbers a lot, and evidence, but I'm also a community member. As a community member, I am ashamed. What's weighing on me is the fact that somebody died in a stairwell in our rich city, in our rich province, in our rich country.

People are starving. We shouldn't need food banks. We shouldn't need shelters. This discussion is just one more red flag about the inadequate underfunding of our public systems. For some reason, and I don't know what justifies it - I'm going to assume it has something to do with assumptions and misconceptions about why people are turning to government.

You have the power and authority and physical capacity to act. I am tired of saying, we told you so. Please act. People are falling through the gaps in our social safety net, and the tragedies that we hear every day are not unique, are not extraordinary. It's not about balancing priorities. We have people who own yachts in this province while people are living in tents. You need more tax revenue, there is more tax revenue to be had. You need to cut spending, we can make suggestions around that.

You need to act, and you need to act quickly. People need you, who have power and authority right now in this government, to change the systems and support people in a real way. Nobody in our province should be living in poverty, nobody should be living in a tent, and nobody should be dying in a stairwell. We are rich; let me underline that. Our province and our economy produce billions and billions of dollars of services every year. We need to share that wealth better, and government has the capacity and the mechanisms to ensure that that happens.

CHRISTINA CARTER: First, Christine, I want to give you a round of applause. I love that.

I hope that the government steps away from the "affordable housing" word. "Affordable" is still controlled by what the market is. We need rent geared to income. Rent



geared to income means that a person is going to be able to buy food and all of the other basic necessities it takes for them to live.

[11:45 a.m.]

I will leave you with that: Let's stop using "affordable." I don't like the word.

THE CHAIR: Mr. Jennery, you have some comments?

NICK JENNERY: Madam Chair, would it be acceptable to you if I asked our board chair, Sylvia Parris-Drummond, to provide those closing comments?

THE CHAIR: Sure. She can come to the microphone and introduce herself. Ms. Parris-Drummond.

SYLVIA PARRIS-DRUMMOND: Thank you for this opportunity. My name is Sylvia Parris-Drummond. I have the privilege and honour of being the board chair for Feed Nova Scotia. I acknowledge Nick and all that he has brought to this conversation. I'm not going to try to directly align and build from that.

I was really pleased to have the opportunity to hear all the witnesses and the contributions here from all parties' perspectives via the questions and comments.

I just need to say that my listening was from the perspective of my lived experience. I identify as a Black African Nova Scotian woman who's been here in terms of ancestrally, who also is very appreciative of a contemporary presence from our community, and also recognizes that there is this cross-connection of those of us who have been disenfranchised by systems and been marginalized by systems.

My thinking was about what is maybe a gap in how we're approaching things from a system future-planning approach. That's really my comment here that I wanted to kind of leave in this air with folks. I heard our responses and sometimes reactions to things - I think we have, collectively, a more future-planning approach that might take us out of a bit of a cycle, which it also sounded like we were speaking to here, as I was listening to what was being said.

I'm also proud to be trying to think this through from a perspective of Afrocentricity - a centring about who we are. We think that we have a lot to contribute in that work, those of us who are embracing and trying to activate in systems and structures being Afrocentric.

I want to say, what if we imagined a society that was totally grounded in equity and love? If that's the way we were going, what might we continue to do, what might we do differently, and how would collaboration look? I wanted to leave you with a couple of symbols. Again, as we are able to talk more about how Afrocentricity is, we're mindful

that learning happens in different ways - visual, written, oral, and so on. Symbols are important for us in that way of translating learning.

I wanted to think about the creation of a quilt that had all of the pieces that we talk about now and that I've heard us talk about, but then also imagine this holistic approach - this fully-developed quilt that has threads of strength through it. What does that look like, in terms of a metaphor about what an equitable, love-filled, just society looks like?

Then I also thought about the calabash. The calabash has many aspects to it. It's a gourd that is grown, that has various fruit grown into it. It's most common in West Africa, in terms of within the continent - and I can see myself doing the symbol. (Laughter) It's all together in that bowl. It doesn't matter the percentages that go in, who puts that in, or whatever.

Whatever that is, it's about change. We generously put in and we see again a wholeness that happens, and we're not looking for how it comes back or what it generates in a different way.

I just wanted to say, I think I'm so appreciative of the people around this table and our Nova Scotian society who are so committed that we have a space where we can see each other as human beings and what that means to be human beings, and in this word around ubuntu that we use as well.

What I want to leave us with is, let's really do future planning in a way that does imagine a society that has those features in it, and what might be changed? I think we all have said in one way or another, whatever the stress is, we haven't gotten it right yet. If we want to get it right, we need to look that way. In the continuing time, this is not an either/or. I want the folks I know who need food to be fed. I want us to be clothed. I want us to be housed. We're not talking about an either/or. We're talking about a multiplicity of things happening. What I'm asking us is to at least maybe show up in words more. It may exist, but from my space, in terms of a caveat and setting there, I didn't hear it.

I want us to be about what the change in society needs to be and what our collective commitments will be to it. Thank you for a piece that allows everybody to hear this at the same time.

THE CHAIR: Deputy Minister Taweel, do you have a few short comments?

TRACEY TAWHEEL: I'll be brief. Thank you very much to colleagues here at the table today for your continued work in this area and for working collaboratively with us, pushing us and challenging us to do better. I would like to just thank the staff at the department. There was a lot of talk today about the stress that people who are working and supporting individuals who are vulnerable are experiencing, and staff at the department are no different. While I am the one sitting here, there are 1,600 people behind me who are

working really hard every single day to provide the best possible service. My thanks to them, and of course to the committee for your questions and your interest in the topic.

THE CHAIR: In respect to time, we don't really have time to call a recess so that we can continue with our committee business, but you're welcome to leave, and we'll finish up. We have a couple pieces of correspondence to discuss. First off, we have the response from the Department of Health and Wellness concerning the request for information set forth by the committee.

BEN JESSOME: Maybe if we can ask for a little bit of clarification here, because the message that we've received to me reads a little bit conflicting. Initially it says, "One of the main goals of ACT is to help keep people living in their homes," so on and so forth, and then the following paragraph says, "While Nova Scotia does not specifically provide an ACP program." I'm assuming that's a typo that means ACT, but the two statements read conflicting to me. On one hand, they reference it as a program - that the goal is to keep people in their homes, the second says that we do not specifically have that program.

We heard a previous witness at this committee reference that program as valuable and important. We, as a caucus, had a subsequent meeting with Shelter Nova Scotia who are unfamiliar with the program. In the last statement of the letter, it goes on to say, "We are working with individuals, communities, and community organizations to ensure we are all striving for the same goal," so on and so forth.

I'm wondering if we can go back to the department and request confirmation as to whether or not there is an ACT program, and if so, how many individuals or which individuals, communities, and community organizations they are working with in order to - if this is something that we can be promoting for these organizations to take advantage of. Having heard discussion about its merits, I believe that we should have the capacity to do that. Seeking clarification through the Chair.

THE CHAIR: Are there any more comments or discussions with regard to MLA Jessome's comments? We will request the clerk to get some clarification on those items.

The second piece of correspondence we received was from the Office of L'nú Affairs, with regard to the follow-up request from Mr. Burrill at the December 6<sup>th</sup> committee meeting. Just wondering if there is any further discussion on that piece of correspondence. Okay, then at this point, I would ask that we have permission or consent from the committee to have this posted to our website for the committee - if everyone is in agreement to that. We'll leave the other committee correspondence to the next meeting. Is that an agreement with everyone?

The next meeting date is February 7, 2023. The topic is community improvement grants. The witnesses will be the Department of Communities, Culture, Tourism and Heritage. That time is, as usual, from 10:00 a.m. until 12:00 p.m. on February 7<sup>th</sup>.

If there is no more committee business, we will adjourn the meeting.

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