

HANSARD

NOVA SCOTIA HOUSE OF ASSEMBLY

STANDING COMMITTEE

ON

COMMUNITY SERVICES

Tuesday, October 3, 2023

Committee Room

The Impact of the Cost of Living Crisis on Energy Poverty

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COMMUNITY SERVICES COMMITTEE

Melissa Sheehy-Richard (Chair)

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[Danielle Barkhouse was replaced by Hon. Steve Craig.]

[Hon. Ben Jessome was replaced by Hon. Brendan Maguire.]

In Attendance:

Gordon Hebb
Chief Legislative Counsel

Tamer Nusseibeh
Legislative Committee Clerk

WITNESSES

Department of Community Services

Joy Knight
Executive Director

Nova Scotia Power

Judith Ferguson
Executive Vice President, Regulatory, Legal, and Government Relations

Lia MacDonald
Vice President, Customer Experience and Innovation

Chris Lanteigne
Director, Customer Care

EfficiencyOne
Stephen MacDonald
President and CEO

Town of Bridgewater

David Mitchell
Mayor

Affordable Energy Coalition

Brian Gifford
Chair

Ecology Action Centre

Chris Benjamin
Senior Energy Coordinator



HALIFAX, TUESDAY, OCTOBER 3, 2023

STANDING COMMITTEE ON COMMUNITY SERVICES

10:00 A.M.

CHAIR

Melissa Sheehy-Richard

VICE CHAIR

John White

THE CHAIR: Order. I call the meeting to order. This is the Standing Committee on Community Services. I'm Melissa Sheehy-Richard. I'm the MLA for Hants West and the Chair of this committee. Today we're going to hear from presenters regarding The Impact of the Cost of Living Crisis on Energy Poverty. I'd ask to remind everyone to make sure their phones are on silent, and in case of emergency, please use the exit door at the back and go out up Granville Street.

At this time I'd like to ask the committee members to introduce themselves for the record by stating their name and constituency. I'll begin with MLA White.

[The committee members introduced themselves.]

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

At this time, I'd like to welcome all the witnesses here. There are a number of you, and I understand everybody does have opening remarks. Just to be mindful of time, I'm asking that you try to keep the remarks brief - around the two- or three-minute mark at most.

We'll begin first, though, by introducing everyone, and then we'll begin with the remarks after that. We can start with Mr. Gifford on this end.

[The witnesses introduced themselves.]

THE CHAIR: We will begin with Mr. Gifford, if you'd like to give your opening remarks. I think it's easiest just to go across.

BRIAN GIFFORD: Thank you very much. We appreciate the opportunity to present here.

The housing crisis is the main story in today's cost of living crisis. But food insecurity and energy poverty remain key elements. The Affordable Energy Coalition formed over 20 years ago to tackle energy poverty, and then electricity rates and oil prices climbed steadily for a decade, making it worse. We are now in another period of energy price volatility and increases that are pushing more people into making impossible choices due to high energy bills.

Energy poverty is connected to the housing crisis in several ways. You can't live in a home without paying your energy bills; people who struggle to pay their rent or homeowner costs are often forced to delay their energy bill payments, which sometimes leads to getting their power disconnected or oil delivery problems.

Super-efficient homes that need almost no energy are affordable homes. Adsum for Women and Children's Sunflower Court will have energy costs 85 per cent lower than code-built homes due to their passive house design.

In 2022, world fossil fuel prices spiked, affecting oil prices here in Nova Scotia. Nova Scotia Power rate hearings led to rising power rates. The government's expansion of the Heating Assistance Rebate Program was a big help, but that was for only one year. Energy poverty remains a major problem.

There are solutions. Energy efficiency has the potential to eliminate energy poverty in Nova Scotia. We must keep investing in low-income efficiency programs and build all new buildings to the highest efficiency standards.

In the meantime, while we are making our homes much more efficient, we can create a systematic program to reduce the energy bills of low- and modest-income households while they wait for deep energy efficiency upgrades.

There was important progress last year. The Nova Scotia Utility and Review Board approved a big expansion of low-income efficiency programs in EfficiencyOne's three-year contract with Nova Scotia Power. The federal and provincial governments funded heat pumps in low- and modest-income homes. We worked with the consumer advocate and Nova Scotia Power on some improvements in debt and disconnection processes and an annual report on troubled accounts.

One of our members reported that “The increase of HARP payments to \$1,000 last winter was a GODSEND! Every one of our clients qualified,” they said, “however, it was especially helpful to oil users. We can only hope that it happens again this winter.”

The HARP increase was very important but short term. We believe the Province can do better. The Affordable Energy Coalition is part of a working group that includes government representatives to create options by late January for a systematic program to reduce energy bills of low- and modest-income households. We encourage the government to adopt one of the options that the group proposes.

We know people are suffering now. We know we can stop that with efficiency and heat pumps and with a program to provide energy bill credits for low- and modest-income households until their homes’ bills drop due to efficiency upgrades. Now is the time to seize the moment and tackle energy poverty once and for all.

Peter Duke will complete our presentation with a few words.

THE CHAIR: Actually, that was a little over the two, and with respect to time, is it okay if we just move on to the next one for the opening remarks? Just trying to get through so that the members have an opportunity to ask questions of the witnesses. Mr. Benjamin.

CHRIS BENJAMIN: I also prepared five minutes. I’ll try to rush through. The crux of the Ecology Action Centre’s message is always bills, not rates. Rates go up and up, but if you live in an efficient system, the amount of energy you use can be small, so your bill can stay small. The challenge, of course, is if you live in an inefficient home, it takes investment to change that, and many of us cannot afford that investment.

We do have a lot of good efficiency programs in this province. Brian mentioned some. I want to talk a bit about HomeWarming, which saves people living on lower incomes an average of 30 per cent on their bills. It and its predecessors have reached more than 24,000 households. This is great.

We know that deep energy retrofits, which is a whole-house retrofit to save energy, saves households 50 per cent or more on their energy bills. This includes things like air sealing, more and better insulation, high-performance windows, ventilation systems, et cetera. The downside is that we have a bunch of homes now that have been through HomeWarming but didn’t get a heat pump, and I’m told that’s already being worked on. That’s great news. Heat pumps - I’m not one to tout one technology as a panacea - but it is a very efficient technology that every home in Nova Scotia should have. They can significantly reduce energy bills in cold months.

Any provincial effort to address energy poverty has to be sophisticated enough to also include renters. This is challenging in part due to what’s called the split incentive

dilemma, which is that renters aren't motivated to upgrade property that they don't own, and landlords aren't motivated to save on energy bills that their tenants often pay.

Here we have Efficiency Nova Scotia's Affordable Multifamily Housing Program. The public needs to see more data on how people have benefitted and how much they've saved, but we're happy that it exists. It requires landlords being funded to commit to a 12-year rent cap. This is sensible, but it can also be a disincentive for landlords.

I want to briefly cite an excellent report by Efficiency Canada called *Energy Efficiency in Rental Housing*. I sent a link in with my submission. It explores different rental housing scenarios and policy instruments to ensure secure housing and affordable energy. I'll skip to some of their conclusions. They recommend a tenant bill of rights - that landlords receiving free energy upgrades have to ensure that benefits are passed to tenants, and that an appointed tenant liaison be part of an overall tenant engagement strategy to ensure fair and meaningful inclusion. What they found is that when tenants were involved, the energy efficiency improved, the security for their living situation also improved, and the affordability improved.

THE CHAIR: Mr. Mitchell.

DAVID MITCHELL: I'm glad you guys had five minutes prepared; I had 10 minutes prepared. As a politician, I guess that makes sense. I'll just skip to the middle of my remarks. I appreciate that today's topic is the impact of the cost of living crisis on energy poverty, because the reality is that paying for stuff is a zero-sum game for households. We have only so much to go around. Housing, food, medication, and energy all need to come from the same pockets.

If the cost of energy goes up and nothing else moves and people don't have more income to compensate, then they experience greater energy poverty. That is it in its simplest form, but it's also not the reality. It's important to realize that if the cost of even one thing goes up, then something else has to give way - say rent increases, which is shocking, I know, but rent can increase. Perhaps the thing that gives way is the power bill or furnace oil. When that happens, then people start to experience energy poverty or they slip into greater energy poverty. In other words, cost of living increases in any area can trigger a slide deeper and deeper into energy poverty.

Imagine your monthly rent going up by \$300, which is now not unheard of. That's \$300 less you have available to spend on your energy. The impacts can be dramatic. Even \$100 per month in greater cost of living adds up to \$1,200 a year, which is the cost of one full tank of heating oil.

The average salary in Nova Scotia is \$4,271 a month. That's average, and I know a lot of you know people in your communities who make far, far less than that.

That's just over \$51,000 a year, which sounds decent. Now take that \$4,271, take away \$1,400 for rent, \$800 for food, and \$500 for transportation, fuel, and maintenance - in this scenario, nothing ever goes wrong with that vehicle, so that's low, but \$500. Add \$100 a month for insurance for the car, another \$100 for tenants' insurance - again, that's low - \$75 for a cellphone plan, \$100 for internet, and maybe \$200 a month for incidentals like clothing, shoes, a Winter jacket, or maybe something in the home breaks and has to be replaced. Then you have just under \$1,000 a month left - \$996 to be exact.

But I missed one issue, and that is the cost of energy. From that \$996 left - basing it on the average income of the average person in our community - from my community they have about \$450 a month in energy costs. In rural Nova Scotia, in every community, it is about \$450 a month. That leaves them under \$550 a month if nothing else goes wrong in their lives.

Now remember that, for you, the definition of energy poverty is spending greater than 6 per cent of your after-tax income on energy. Well, that \$450 is more than 10 per cent of their pre-tax income on energy.

Now add another \$100 for rent and \$100 for food increases, take gas and incidentals and add \$20 to each of those, and there's less than \$300 left a month. If you happen to be lucky enough to own a home, well, you have to turn that rent into a mortgage, and I haven't even factored in property taxes. So add another \$200 per month for property tax, and that person has \$100 left - except they haven't paid their credit card debt loans. Anything with monthly interest probably takes many times that \$100, leaving them in a debit position every month.

I'm basing that on that average monthly income of \$4,271. That's \$51,000 a year, and there are hundreds of thousands of Nova Scotians not making \$51,000 a year. People making \$60,000 or \$70,000 or \$80,000 a year are stretched.

THE CHAIR: Ms. Knight.

JOY KNIGHT: Thank you, Madam Chair and committee members, for having me here today to talk about the impact of the cost of living crisis on energy poverty.

It is my role as the Executive Director of Employment Support and Income Assistance to serve and support our most vulnerable citizens. It is a privilege that I take very seriously. I am really pleased to be here today to talk to you about the work under way in our department.

I'm deeply committed to advancing solutions across government related to poverty and energy poverty, recognizing that poverty requires the collective response of all of us if we're going to make a dent and make a difference. I'm very grateful to the guests who are

with me here today for the work and advocacy that they do as well in this space to advance solutions for vulnerable Nova Scotians.

As we are discussing today, Atlantic Canadians face the highest energy poverty rates in the country, with 37 per cent of Nova Scotians experiencing energy poverty. We have heard already from members here that energy poverty is having a significant impact on people in our province and their families - people choosing between disruptions in their service because of utility arrears, or sacrificing essentials such as groceries or medication to keep up with bill payments.

Over the last year, government has made numerous investments to support vulnerable Nova Scotians who are struggling with the cost of living and affordability. The Heating Assistance Rebate Program, as already mentioned, helps low- and moderate-income Nova Scotians with home heating costs. To help with the rising costs, the Province increased the income threshold last Winter to help more households pay for their own heat. The Seniors Care Grant program has been increased to \$750 to help seniors with rising costs, which include paying for home heating. Our partners at EfficiencyOne have great programs like the HomeWarming program that provides free heat pumps and other home upgrades to low- and moderate-income households while being environmentally responsible.

Our homelessness sector has greatly benefited from supports through EfficiencyOne to install heat pumps in shelters and supportive-housing units. This reduces operational costs and assures that funding can stretch further to serve more Nova Scotians. Last December, we also provided additional funding to transition houses that support women and children fleeing domestic violence to help address the rising cost of food, fuel, and transportation.

We know that a preventive focus is critical to lifting up all Nova Scotians and families out of poverty permanently, and this approach requires a long-term commitment and the collective efforts of all of us. I recognize that there is still a lot more to do, and we will continue to work diligently to identify and implement measures to support Nova Scotians. We welcome your questions today.

THE CHAIR: Mr. Lanteigne.

CHRIS LANTEIGNE: I'm going to save us a bit of time. Lia MacDonald is going to make Nova Scotia Power's opening remarks.

THE CHAIR: Ms. MacDonald.

LIA MACDONALD: Good morning. On behalf of Nova Scotia Power, I want to thank you all for the invitation to be here to talk about the impacts of the cost of living and energy poverty. It's a pleasure to be joined by witnesses from the Department of

Community Services, the Affordable Energy Coalition, Town of Bridgewater, EfficiencyOne and the Ecology Action Centre, who will also share their perspectives and expertise on this very important issue.

[10:15 a.m.]

Many of the participants here today are part of the low-income advisory group, a crucial part of our collective commitment to finding ways to support our customers. We continue to work together to support vulnerable Nova Scotians who are challenged by the rising cost of living, including the cost of electricity. We understand this is a struggle for many Nova Scotians, and we are committed to being part of the efforts to address these pressures for our customers.

To address rising inflation and the cost of living, we continue to explore ways that we can work with community advocates and the low-income advisory group to support our customers. Our low-income advocate is an employee on our team who is dedicated to working with customers every day to help them make payment arrangements and plans that best support their needs. They have more than 4,000 interactions annually with more than 40 low-income advocacy and support groups, including First Nations representatives and aligned government departments.

There are several key recommendations that have come from these discussions, and we are in the process of working together on them, including: providing energy efficiency options to the clients of the low-income advisory group members; reducing barriers by easing the burden of payment for prior amounts owed when reconnecting for clients experiencing homelessness; ensuring customers don't get too far into debt and that they are not disconnected due to non-payment; and reviewing our security deposit policy, as these deposits can be an extra barrier for low-income people in getting their power connected.

For more than a decade, our low-income advocacy efforts have focused on these factors and the factors that influence energy poverty and exploring ways to address these complex social issues. We work with any customer who reaches out to us to support them with a range of options, including personalized payment arrangements on arrears amounts. Our goal is to prevent customers from being disconnected or ending up in substantial debt.

In addition to our low-income advocacy efforts, Nova Scotia Power has contributed \$37 million over the past ten years to both the Salvation Army Home Energy Assistance Top-up, HEAT, Fund and the HomeWarming program, and we remain committed to these important programs.

We wish to thank the members of the low-income advisory group, who provide expert counsel and invaluable input to inform our efforts to support low-income customers. We know that our customers depend on us for reliable, safe and low-cost power. To do this,

it will take our collective efforts and a system of supports and services for our most vulnerable citizens.

We know there is still work to do, and we remain committed to working together with government, stakeholders, advocates, and the community to address energy poverty in Nova Scotia.

THE CHAIR: Ms. Ferguson, did you have opening remarks? Mr. MacDonald.

STEPHEN MACDONALD: Thank you and good morning again. It's a pleasure to be here to speak on this really important and timely topic.

Atlantic Canada has the highest spending on household energy use in the country and for many people, their energy bill is often their largest bill. As the price of energy and other goods and services continues to rise, many Nova Scotians are struggling to pay their bills.

There are many factors that influence energy poverty, and three of the main ones are income, the cost or the price of energy per unit, and the amount of energy used. On that third point - the amount of energy used - using less energy - or to put a bit of a finer point on it, using energy more efficiently - can be one of the most effective ways to reduce energy bills. Installing just one mini-split heat pump in an oil-heated home can reduce energy costs by 15 to 25 per cent. Additional upgrades like insulation, draft-proofing a home, and switching to LED lighting can not only move families out of energy poverty but their homes will be more comfortable, have better air quality, and will increase in value.

Through Efficiency Nova Scotia, there are several programs that are targeted to low- and moderate-income homeowners and landlords with tenants of lower incomes. Some of these programs have been mentioned this morning.

I'd like to note that there has been significant investment by both the Province and the Government of Canada in efficiency programs that mitigate energy poverty. We have not been around that long as an organization - about 13 years - and during that time, there have been governments from three political parties, all of which have prioritized investments in energy efficiency for lower-income Nova Scotians. Others appearing before us today, including the Ecology Action Centre, the Affordable Energy Coalition, the Town of Bridgewater, and Nova Scotia Power, have consistently supported and pushed for increased efforts with respect to energy efficiency and how it can be used to alleviate energy poverty.

THE CHAIR: At this point, we're going to open the floor up for questioning. I just want to remind everybody who's here today, once I acknowledge you, just wait for your microphone to turn red before speaking so that Legislative Television can pick you up. We will move to the Liberal caucus, and we begin with MLA Maguire.

HON. BRENDAN MAGUIRE: Before I get started on the questions, there was a comment that - I guess it's part of the questions - but one of the comments that was made by the Department of Community Services was a lot of great things have happened over the last 12 months. I would disagree. I represent a community that has some of the highest poverty levels in all of Nova Scotia, and it's only gotten worse.

I'm going to read you some statistics that I can table, but they're out there. Rents have gone up in the last year on average 7.5 per cent. That was reported by the CBC. Grocery bills in Nova Scotia have gone up 13.1 per cent. I see the government writing notes. They're going to blame it on the carbon tax, so we can just get that out of here already, which we know they did not negotiate on, but I'll touch on that later.

Fuel has gone up. I think we are the worst in Canada now for inflation. The list just goes on and on. I counted over 40 tents on the way - if you know where PAVIA Gallery - Espresso Bar & Cafe is in Herring Cove, from PAVIA all the way here - 40 tents. Those aren't the ones that I can't see in the woods.

My question is a simple question: When it comes to income assistance rates, how much have they gone up? How much did the actual rate that people receive every month, how much did it go up last year and the year before, percentage-wise? Just income assistance, no other programs.

JOY KNIGHT: The income assistance budget increased by six per cent, then this last budget, with numerous investments for young people who are attached to our services from a prevention perspective, and significant investments to expand our provincial program into low-income households attached to the Department of Community Services and the income assistance budget.

BRENDAN MAGUIRE: When people are coming into my office, you're telling me every person who's on income assistance received a six per cent increase in their monthly amount? Every single one of them received a six per cent increase?

JOY KNIGHT: The increases for income assistance are related to increases to special needs for income assistance clients, which would include optical and dental care, significant improvements we were able to provide to our clients who are eligible for those. Prevention programming is separate from income assistance rates.

BRENDAN MAGUIRE: The actual answer is zero per cent. It didn't go up at all. If you are dental - and let's be honest, not everyone gets approved for dental, not everyone gets approved for glasses and these special circumstances. The actual rate is zero per cent. Zero per cent that our most vulnerable Nova Scotians have gone up.

We're seeing 13 per cent for groceries, 7.5 per cent for rent increases, 4.7 per cent inflation, 1.3 per cent power. Unbelievably, Nova Scotia Power is the lowest increase out

of everything in Nova Scotia. I don't know what they're doing, but everybody else is either close to double digits or double digits.

How are people supposed to live? That's my question: How are people supposed to live? There was just a report done by the food banks across Canada that said Nova Scotia is the worst for food poverty in Canada. That is shameful. The response in the article wasn't about people on income assistance, because we know they're using the food banks. They're saying these are middle-class and working-class folks now who are unable to afford anything.

Unfortunately, we don't have anyone here who could answer this question, but one of the things that I would like to put out there is two years ago, when this government was elected, one of the promises made by the Premier of Nova Scotia was a Better Pay Cheque Guarantee. He said it in the debates. He said, Day 1, Better Pay Cheque Guarantee. A year later, the Minister of Finance and Treasury Board called in to the Rick Howe Show or whatever show it is - I think it was Todd Veinotte's show - and said: We're working on it. The budget that was just passed, nothing was in it, but the next budget, people will start to see relief, and we're working in a collaborative manner with all of the departments on a Better Pay Cheque Guarantee. Well, that was that budget, not the last budget, which he promised. I called in right away and I said to them: No chance in hell that Nova Scotians are going to get a better paycheque in the next 12 months.

One of the things that the Minister of Finance and Treasury Board did say is that there is collaborative work being done by all departments. I would ask as the representative for the Department of Community Services: Was your department part of any conversation or working group in the last 12 months for a better paycheque for Nova Scotians?

JOY KNIGHT: I wasn't a member of those working groups so I wouldn't be aware. I believe that as our department holds the child poverty mandate in a number of key cross-government initiatives, there very well may have been executive staff within the department who participated.

I am aware and work very collaboratively with my partners across government around issues related to the current challenges we're facing. We certainly don't shy away from acknowledging that these are challenging times and that we know that people need targeted supports to navigate and work through the affordability and housing crisis that we're facing right now.

I work very closely with the Department of Municipal Affairs and Housing, which is responsible for the rent supplement program, which supports many of our clients to be able to meet their rental needs. I work very, very closely with the Department of Health and Wellness, the Office of Addictions and Mental Health, as well as the Nova Scotia Health Authority around how we ensure they have access to health care services that they need to be able to be well, and better manage and retain the housing that they have.

In addition, I think it's important to note we've made significant investments in what we call diversion funding. Our diversion funding is delivered through our community agency partners, which is provided to low-income Nova Scotians who are facing eviction or are unable to pay their utility bills or have arrears that are making their housing a precarious situation. We've had significant outcomes related to providing that interim funding to support Nova Scotians.

BRENDAN MAGUIRE: I want to thank you. You brought up two things. First of all, the diversion funding. I'm very well aware of the diversion funding. People are not able to get it month after month, so if you're living in poverty, it might help push off getting kicked out and living in a tent - and Ms. Knight, I'm not putting this all on you. Unfortunately, you're the only government representative here today, but the truth is that this is a municipal, provincial and federal issue. This is a past government and current government issue. We all collectively need to take responsibility for this. I apologize if you feel like you're getting the brunt of it. I could go after the Ecology Action Centre, but I don't think they could increase income assistance rates. (Laughter)

I do want to say that I don't like this - and I've heard this over and over from this government. They're hiding behind the rent supplements. I know that it was something that we did, but one of the things that this government did - and you've said that you were in discussion with the Department of Municipal Affairs and Housing, so obviously the Department of Community Services had part of it - is something that is extremely cruel. It was cruel. To go from 30 per cent to 50 per cent of your income to be eligible is absolutely horrendous.

I guarantee - I've said it before and I'll say it again - that nobody around this table is spending 50 per cent of their income on housing. Yet we think that's acceptable for people who are living, not paycheque to paycheque - who spend a vast majority of their free time looking for food banks. You know, I had someone come in to my office the other day who was banned from a food bank for a month because she had been to three. What kind of impact, as the executive director, did this change from 30 per cent to 50 per cent? Government said they did this because there was too much uptake and too much money was being spent. They just had a \$116-million surplus. My question is: What do those people who are no longer eligible, what do they do?

JOY KNIGHT: The rent supplement program is a critical tool for us. Income assistance clients are the predominant users of that program, and we continue to work really closely with them to ensure it continues to meet the needs of income assistance clients who are the target focus for the program area that I oversee.

There's always opportunity to improve, and we are in frequent conversations with them around how they can better meet the needs of Nova Scotians through that program. We'll continue to have those with them.

[10:30 a.m.]

I also recognize, though, that more needs to be done. I said that in my opening remarks and I stay true to that. We know that we have to keep the dialogue going. We need to keep hearing from members like you who are here around where the gaps are and where we need to do better in closing those gaps with our community partners and across communities in Nova Scotia.

I'm always looking to hear more, to be on the ground with communities. I just spent two days yesterday with the homelessness sector, with all of our service provider partners, hearing directly from them first voice around what's going on and how we can do better. I'll continue to do that.

BRENDAN MAGUIRE: Again, I will say that I think when it comes to departments and when it comes to individuals working in the department like you, your hands are tied to the government of the day, whether it's a Liberal, Progressive Conservative, or NDP government. I know it's not easy to work within those environments. Priorities change, obviously, but saying that we're looking to improve, there's an easy improvement - 50 per cent to 30 per cent. Walk that back. That needs to be walked back.

When we're taking an extra 20 per cent of people's income, which in some people's case that's that difference between eating – I shouldn't say in some people's case; in most people's cases. We just had a hurricane, and EMO and the Department of Municipal Affairs and Housing put out all kinds of things on what you should do to prepare for a hurricane. It all costs money. Get batteries. Get flashlights. Get extra food. Get propane tanks. I'm looking at it going: People can't afford that.

I would say I appreciate the work that's being done, but there's an easy solution. That needs to be walked back. If the government is running a surplus and at the same time taking money off the backs of our most vulnerable, to me that's a shameful government. I don't care what party they are. If this was the Liberal Party doing it or if this was the NDP doing it, I would say the same thing. I quite frankly don't care. I'll move on from Community Services.

I think that we did hear some rumblings about a conversation about income-based pricing for power bills. I'd like to put this to Ms. Ferguson or Ms. MacDonald or Mr. Lanteigne: Are there conversations going on within Nova Scotia Power for income-based pricing for power bills for low-income people? Have you had those conversations with government, and where are we on that?

THE CHAIR: Would that be Mr. Lanteigne?

CHRIS LANTEIGNE: We do agree that cost pressures on Nova Scotians are a very important concern. On the topic of a low-income rate or a universal service program, that could help Nova Scotians with an on-bill credit. We have had conversations on that over the course of the past probably couple of years, but only with the Affordable Energy Coalition until just recently. In talking with Brian Gifford and others from the Affordable Energy Coalition, they have helped us understand programs that exist across the rest of Canada and North America as well.

Recently in the working group that Brian actually talked about in his opening, the government has been at the table, and it's really just a kick-off to talk about options that could be available for Nova Scotians. That was just within the last couple of weeks.

BRENDAN MAGUIRE: Quickly, how many clients from Nova Scotia Power do you think would be eligible for this? If you could just give me a quick percentage off the top of your head.

CHRIS LANTEIGNE: Sure. Right now, I will first start by saying that we don't actually know if someone within Nova Scotia Power - one of our customers - is low income, unless they actually self identify. That is one of the challenges we have. But what we do know right now, if we look at the percentage of our customers who are behind on their bills, that number is at about 4 per cent of customers who have arrears balances and are behind, and we would say could be at risk of potentially being disconnected.

BRENDAN MAGUIRE: I would guess it's probably a little higher than 4 per cent of your clients, just from my own personal experience of doing this job. The thing that I'm a little worried about - I'm wondering if this discussion was had between Nova Scotia Power, the government, and the Affordable Energy Coalition. Let's just round it up to 10 per cent. Let's say that 10 per cent of your clients - and I think it'll be higher than that - will fall under this. Obviously, there'll be an affordable energy rate. That's less money for Nova Scotia Power, obviously. Will the government be subsidizing that money or will that be passed on to the other consumers who don't fall under this?

CHRIS LANTEIGNE: First of all, your comment on the percentage of customers who could be eligible - I wouldn't disagree with you. Again, I just know the numbers that we actually have within Nova Scotia Power, the information that we actually have available.

From my perspective, there are a variety of ways that such a program for an on-bill credit or universal service program can be funded. The Ontario model is a taxpayer model, and there are models in the United States that actually do charge it to other ratepayers.

BRENDAN MAGUIRE: I want to talk to, I think, the Ecology Action Centre maybe a little bit, and Efficiency Nova Scotia about some of these programs. I think, Mr. Benjamin, you hit the nail on the head when you said renters are just - it's not that they

don't want to put the investment into a property they don't own. It's, quite frankly, that they can't afford it. If you go to maybe the North End or Spryfield or Whitney Pier or other places like that, and ask people who are renting if they can afford a heat pump or solar panels or whatever it is, the vast majority of people are going to say no.

While with Efficiency Nova Scotia, it's been very successful, and we appreciate everything they're doing, the truth of the matter is that it's really not hitting the people who can't afford power. That's something that we've seen for a long time. If you're living in public housing or if you're living with a landlord who, quite frankly - and we see a lot of them - refuses to put the investments in to make their places energy efficient, then the individual who's paying the power bill bears the cost.

I would guess that the vast majority of public housing is not energy efficient, and no government - Liberal, Progressive Conservative, or NDP - has put that investment into public housing to make it energy efficient. We're not pointing fingers; I'll allow other people to do that.

Mr. Benjamin, how effective are these programs if they're not really helping the most vulnerable in society? What would you suggest? I would throw that at Mr. MacDonald too.

CHRIS BENJAMIN: Yes, it is difficult for me to assess how effective they are at that, but from my understanding, they're not ineffective. The Affordable Multifamily Housing Program, which is designed for renters, is reaching people, but the commitment to a 12-year rent cap can be a disincentive, in my mind. That's why we're looking at, sort of conceptually, ways that landlords can be engaged that will attract them but will also work for their tenants. That's the split-incentive issue.

Looking at models from other jurisdictions, the ones that seemed to work best are the ones that are multi-policy instruments - so you have a policy to support energy efficiency, but also to support renters. You need renter protections, and you need to engage renters in the process, and we see very little of that happening. It's not happening here. It's not happening in very many places, but it should be. If you look at this table, I don't think any of us are living in energy poverty. Those are voices that are important and should be heard directly, and should be involved in designing their own fate. What energy efficiency would you benefit from? What would you like to see in your own apartments and how can we make that happen for you? What do you need to make it secure, that you're comfortable, that you're not going to be renovicted as a result of the upgrades?

It has to be both parties at the table - landlords and their tenants. It shouldn't be adversarial, although it can be. We have to work beyond that. Where that has happened, it's been very effective for both housing security and energy efficiency programs in saving money.

THE CHAIR: You have 15 seconds. (Interruption) Mr. MacDonald.

STEPHEN MACDONALD: Really quickly, the rental market is very difficult for all the reasons that you mentioned. The program that Mr. Benjamin mentioned is an important program. It needs more emphasis, if you will. Funding is in place but it needs a co-operative effort from lots of people. Rental markets are incredibly impactful to get at for efficiency because of the benefit and who they benefit.

THE CHAIR: Order. We will now move on to 20 minutes of questioning from the NDP caucus and MLA Coombes.

KENDRA COOMBES: I want to go back to talking about the universal service program. It's been said here that conversations have been had and one of the biggest blockades to having a universal service program is the fact that our public utilities legislation does not allow for it. It's unfortunate that the Department of Natural Resources and Renewables is not here today so others are going to have to potentially answer for them on these questions.

We discussed that there have been conversations. We understand a panel has been or is supposed to be convened to investigate low income rates. Does anyone know if that panel has been convened officially?

BRIAN GIFFORD: Yes. It started three weeks ago, and it includes representatives from three government departments: the AEC - the Affordable Energy Coalition - EfficiencyOne, and the Clean Foundation. There are some others that are likely to become involved, but the three departments are Community Services, Natural Resources and Renewables, and Service Nova Scotia, which delivers the HARP.

KENDRA COOMBES: Obviously, the Department of Community Services is on this panel. To the Department of Community Services: What work have you undertaken with the Department of Natural Resources and Renewables on this issue of the universal service program? Has there been advocacy from the department?

JOY KNIGHT: As mentioned, our first meeting was actually just a couple of weeks ago. Our representative from Employment Support and Income Assistance is our Director of Income Assistance - to bring forward that lens and understanding of those who are facing the deepest poverty in our province. The conversations have just started with our first meeting and so we look forward to continuing to engage in that with them.

KENDRA COOMBES: Am I to understand that no advocacy to create such a program or to even amend the Public Utilities Act to allow it was advocated by the Department of Community Services as of yet?

JOY KNIGHT: We're in the early stages, so I would say that the Department of Community Services is always advocating for solutions and changes that support income assistance clients. The conversation, while I wasn't present, I believe is starting to focus on what those solutions might look like, but collectively we haven't reached any sort of recommendations yet around what we might be advocating for and moving for government consideration.

KENDRA COOMBES: How would a universal service program impact your clients?

[10:45 a.m.]

JOY KNIGHT: I apologize, but this question is a little beyond my scope of knowledge. It's one that I would have to defer to my colleagues in other departments to help understand what that programming looks like. It wouldn't be something designed by Community Services. We'll remain at the table, we'll remain there to support those conversations as best we can, and we remain committed to it.

KENDRA COOMBES: I was hoping for more substantive answers on this because we are talking about energy poverty here. With ESIA clients, energy poverty is just one of the many factors that they face. I was hoping that we'd have a little more robust answer as to how a program like this could actually help them.

Maybe we can talk about the actual impacts of high energy costs on clients. Can you provide to me the impact of high energy costs and energy poverty on ESIA clients?

JOY KNIGHT: As I mentioned in my opening remarks, we are aware that energy poverty is impacting income assistance clients as well as low-income households in Nova Scotia. That's one of the key reasons we've expanded diversion funds across the province significantly. It's around \$1 million now to support Nova Scotians, recognizing that some people are struggling to pay their utility bills. We want to make sure people are able to do so and stay housed.

We do hear about food security and have made some one-time investments over the last couple of years to support food security needs. I would say that we do continuously hear, because that is a really important part of my job, to be listening, to be meeting with impacted individuals, and I do so very regularly and will continue to do so, so that the scope and challenge of the issue is always forefront in our minds.

KENDRA COOMBES: I'm going to take the same stance as my colleague MLA Maguire took and say that unfortunately, you're the only government official here, so don't feel like we're trying to beat up completely on you, Executive Director Knight. It's just unfortunate that you are the only provincial government official here to speak to these issues.

Diversion funds are often tapped out. One-time investments don't work because they're one-time. They work for the short term. They don't have actual long-term impacts later. With that, we have ESIA clients who can't afford food, have to go to food banks. We have ESIA clients who cannot afford some of their rent, so they have to go to rent supplements. We have ESIA clients who cannot afford their energy costs. Is there something wrong with ESIA in the fact that there's not enough money to cover the cost of living for them?

JOY KNIGHT: I certainly would acknowledge that there's always more we can do. We also recognize, though, that income assistance isn't and can't be everything to everybody. We have to work across all departments if we're going to truly holistically meet the needs of all Nova Scotians experiencing poverty.

We're very focused on taking a client-centered approach. We apply a lens using the social determinants of health, which would include food security, housing, and health and well-being. That's why it's so important that we're working across all departments and having conversations with key departments and our colleagues around what all the targeted solutions and broad system changes are that we have to look at that will have longer-term, generational impacts that we're all seeking.

I would agree that you can't only have one-time interventions. System change and our desire to move to a more preventive-focused department are critical parts of the path that we're on, and that's why these investments that I mentioned earlier and prevention-focused interventions for young people are critical. We want to work with families experiencing poverty to break the cycle of poverty and help young people feel hope, feel connected to their communities, get work experience and training, engage in post-secondary, a number of things to help change that cycle of poverty and truly shift the direction of the province.

I know that's not something that is going to happen overnight, so we remain committed to that long-term system change.

KENDRA COOMBES: I hope you're talking to your colleagues at the Department of Municipal Affairs and Housing regarding going from a 30 per cent rent supplement to a 50 per cent, because that is what is damaging and harming a lot of people in my constituency of Cape Breton Centre-Whitney Pier and many others across this province.

This is a yes or no: Do you collect data on energy costs for ESIA clients?

JOY KNIGHT: We do not. With the implementation of a standard household rate, we are no longer collecting housing-related data the way we previously did. The change was to allow for more autonomy in how clients use their income assistance benefit, so we no longer collect that type of information.

KENDRA COOMBES: ESIA policy 8.2.2(c) allows for special needs and expenses to be granted for the utility arrears in certain cases. How many of these grants have been issued this year, last year, and historically?

JOY KNIGHT: I would be very happy to get that for you. I don't have those numbers here with me, but I will certainly provide them.

KENDRA COOMBES: I'll ask the Chair and the clerk to follow up.

Do you know how many applications have been denied versus approved this year?

JOY KNIGHT: If you mean applications to a caseworker for utility arrears to be - yes. So we don't have an application process. It is a conversation between the client and the caseworker when they're finding themselves in a situation of arrears. It is done at the local office level, so not something that comes in for our review.

We want to empower our caseworkers to be able to have that conversation and provide that support to their client when they need it. I wouldn't be aware of cases where it was determined that that coverage wouldn't be provided.

KENDRA COOMBES: How many clients have had their power cut off in the last year?

JOY KNIGHT: Actually, Nova Scotia Power has offered to answer that question, if that's all right.

CHRIS LANTEIGNE: Thanks, Ms. Knight, and thanks for the question. I just want to start by saying that disconnecting customers for not paying their bill is our last resort. We do everything we can to work with them.

So far this year, we have had 2,825 residential customers disconnected for not being able to pay their bills.

KENDRA COOMBES: To the Department of Community Services, I understand autonomy, but I think in order to understand what our clients - what Nova Scotians - are going through when it comes to energy poverty, we need to start collecting the data. Without the data, we cannot provide evidence of what's going right and what's going wrong. Without that evidence, we cannot make changes that are necessary and needed within the department. That is the importance of data.

Although autonomy is wonderful and we need to allow autonomy, we also need to allow for data so that we can change programs that are not working or provide more funding to programs that are working.

Given the stark increases we've seen in recent years in the cost of living and energy costs, will your department increase the rates of ESIA to account for this?

JOY KNIGHT: As I think the member is aware, that's a conversation that happens during the budget process, so I'm unable to answer.

KENDRA COOMBES: Do you know if the Heating Assistance Rebate Program will be topped up again this year?

JOY KNIGHT: That program is administered by Service Nova Scotia. I am not privy to the conversations they've had internally regarding that program.

KENDRA COOMBES: Will your department be advocating for the top-up to happen?

JOY KNIGHT: I have already actually been in conversations with the department. I am frequently, as well as with Nova Scotia Power, and understanding the trends and the changes in individuals experiencing arrears. Your previous point around data is a critical one. I do fully agree. We are always seeking data sources and other sources of information that help us to get a more solid picture around the impacts to low-income Nova Scotians.

Yes, I will be in conversations with them around how that program can serve our most vulnerable.

KENDRA COOMBES: Remind me how much time I have?

THE CHAIR: Six minutes.

KENDRA COOMBES: I'm going to take one more question and ask the Affordable Energy Coalition how the cost of living crisis has impacted people's ability to afford their energy bills. After that, I'll cede my time to my colleague, Suzy Hansen. (Interruption)

BRIAN GIFFORD: As we said in our introductory statement, energy costs are a lot higher, especially oil. That interacts with all the other increasing costs. There definitely is an increasing problem. We don't have statistics on it. People who might actually have better statistics are Efficiency Nova Scotia. They have a model that shows what the impact of different prices has on energy poverty in Nova Scotia. That's based on old statistics, but you can put in the price of oil and electricity and see how that affects things. That's on a modelling basis.

If you don't mind, I'd just like to talk a little more about the universal service program. This group that had been set up was something that we suggested after the Heating Assistance Rebate Program increase last year. We were very glad that it was set

up. It's too late to affect this year's policy at the government level, but we're hoping that it will affect next year's.

As Chris was saying, we've circulated to this group - and also in the package that we gave to you - examples of three different ways of dealing with this issue that actually exist. One of them is the HARP example, where you do a one-time payment. Another one is the universal service program in the United States. The one-time payment that HARP uses is based on income. The U.S. example is based on income and energy costs, and it is ratepayer funded. The Ontario example is based on income and family size and it is taxpayer funded.

Whatever the way of subsidizing is that you work out, you can fund it either through ratepayers or taxpayers. These are all things that will be looked at by this group. We will come up with some models to suggest to Nova Scotia. We're hoping it will have something - like the Ontario one is one that is kind of a modified version of a universal service program, and we're hoping Nova Scotia can come up with its own design that works well in Nova Scotia.

THE CHAIR: MLA Hansen.

SUZY HANSEN: My question is going to be to the Ecology Action Centre. How does your organization engage with the issue of energy poverty, and how do you see energy poverty being impacted by the shift to renewables? How can we best support low-income Nova Scotians through this transition?

CHRIS BENJAMIN: We work a lot with the Affordable Energy Coalition. We're a member and a big supporter. We're on a number of coalitions and we're part of this working group, and we're happy to be part of that, working on some form of universal service program - a made-in-Nova Scotia version.

I think the shift to renewables - I mean, it's a transition. There are risks. The key to doing that effectively for any income level is to provide a lot of supports. I'm a big advocate of navigation supports. Efficiency Nova Scotia has a dazzling array of programs. Barry Walker, who works there, sat down with me for an hour and a half one day and went through them all, and my brain was in a fog afterward. It's great that those are all available. It's phenomenal. We have one of the best energy efficiency organizations in the country, in my opinion.

But how is someone supposed to figure out what's what without Barry Walker handy to help you? The website is kind of - I mean, websites - they don't do the job. You can't navigate through a website if you're an average person. Regardless of the income level, I think we need more supports for individual households, whether they be renters or owners. What I always say is: bills, not rates. Focus on how we can get bills down.

[11:00 a.m.]

Rates go up and up and up. That's just the reality that we all face. I know there are measures - economic measures - we take to deal with inflation, but beyond that, rates do go up and up. That's the reality of dealing with fossil fuels. Until we get off them, that's going to be an issue. The question is: How do we transition in a way that works for people and does not put people out of house and home?

SUZY HANSEN: My next question will be to EfficiencyOne, and I'm grateful that there is a plethora of supports and information for folks to be able to access. I have actually spoken to a number of people who are doing some EfficiencyOne projects, and they have said amazing things about getting in community, doing outreach, speaking to people, connecting to figure out what that looks like across the province in many different areas.

I just want to ask: Do you have stats on the average income annual home energy costs?

THE CHAIR: Mr. MacDonald, and you've got your 17 seconds again.

STEPHEN MACDONALD: I don't know if I have the exact statistics that you're asking about, but I do have statistics on energy use, particularly oil use by the average homeowner in the province, which I'd be happy to share. I don't know if I can get that all out in 17 seconds or not, but (interruption). Okay, I'll do that.

THE CHAIR: We will now move over to the PC caucus, beginning with MLA Taggart.

TOM TAGGART: My first question will be for the Department of Community Services. I would like to note before we start that our good friend across the way was critical that there was only one government responding here. His party chose the topic and the witnesses. We have continually advocated for more government response at the table.

Anyway, my question is to the Department of Community Services. One of the things our government is doing to help low-income and income assistance clients with their energy costs is the Seniors Care Grant and Heating Assistance Rebate Program.

These two programs don't fall under your department, but I'm wondering if you could speak to how your department works across the different government departments to help affordable issues, as well as external organizations that we might partner with.

JOY KNIGHT: I mentioned a number of things that we do across government, which I'll mention again. There's the heat program that we work actually from the data collection perspective and understanding the impacts. I frequently contact the Salvation

Army to understand the effect that's having and to support them in that work, even though that's administered through a different department.

We work very closely with our colleagues who do the HARP, as well as those who administer the Residential Tenancies Program. I've already heard here today the importance of working with Residential Tenancies around renters' education and recognize that that work needs to be done and that there's a really important space for the Department of Community Services and our clients, so working very closely with them learning how they understand their rights and are able to retain their housing.

There's the rent supplement program that we've touched on. We know there are improvements that can be made there, but it is a critical lever to support affordability for Nova Scotians, and we continue to work closely with that department around how we make sure our clients have access and how we may advocate a little bit for changes there that better meet needs.

We work very closely with the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development around child care fees, noting that it's very hard for families with children to engage in work and to improve their own adequacy if they are unable to participate through transportation-related barriers or child care-related barriers. Lots of conversations and investments are happening there.

Further, I might just put a little plug in for supportive housing, which is under the mandate of Community Services, which we've made significant progress in over the last two years. I just want to note that supportive housing is affordable housing. It's a key lever in how we ensure that people who may have some difficulties attaching to housing permanently are able to do so in a way that meets their unique needs, provides wraparound services, and helps them successfully and safely to find well-being in their own home. We've created 417 units in the last two years alone and have made very significant progress from an affordable housing perspective, including as part of the full affordable housing mandate of government.

TOM TAGGART: Before I turn it over to my colleague MLA Harrison, can you clarify – this is for Community Services as well - can you clarify for us how we measure poverty in Nova Scotia and why it is important to measure it that way?

JOY KNIGHT: In Nova Scotia, we use what's known as the Market Basket Measure, which is a poverty measure that has been defined by the federal government. We use Statistics Canada for our data, and we use Statistics Canada data and the federal poverty measure because we want to be able to compare ourselves across the country and understand where improvements are needed and how we're doing.

The MBM - Market Basket Measure - is a great poverty measure because it looks at a basket of goods, the essentials that a person needs to be well in their community - like

transportation, food, clothing and shelter. It adjusts based on the costs within each region, so you would have a different MBM for Cape Breton than you would for Halifax. Across the country, it is a measure that looks at the actual cost for each jurisdiction, so you can measure with more accuracy how poverty is impacting families. It's different from a low-income measure, which is just an income measure. It doesn't look at the relative affordability of a region.

A good example is if rents were to suddenly decrease by 50 per cent, the low-income measure wouldn't take that into account and recognize that people are better off as the incomes themselves never changed. MBM would account for a change, whether it's an inflation of rental pressures or a decrease in rental pressures, and how that impacts affordability in general.

THE CHAIR: We will go to MLA Harrison.

LARRY HARRISON: I have a couple of questions for Mr. MacDonald. One is the government invested \$140 million in heat pumps for low- and mid-income folks. How is that working out in making life better? It may be more efficient, but is it making life more affordable for people, having that program?

STEPHEN MACDONALD: It was a significant investment from the Province to add heat pumps to homes in the province. Heat pumps, as I mentioned in my opening remarks, can have a significant impact on the usage of energy. Just one mini-split heat pump can reduce energy bills by anywhere from 15 to 25 per cent just because of more efficient technology. Oftentimes - and there's been a focus on putting those heat pumps in homes that are primarily heated by oil - it also comes with the benefit of displacing oil usage.

The price of oil has increased significantly over the past couple of years. I was looking at some statistics in advance of appearing here today on the price of oil. Prior to the pandemic - roughly in the Winter of 2019, early 2020 heating season - the price of oil was about \$1 a litre - \$1.1 dollars a litre, sometimes less than \$1 a litre. In terms of an average home in the province, that means about \$3,300 a year to heat that home. That's oil and electricity used for appliances all-in, if you will.

During the 2022 period, at times of the year, the price of oil increased to north of \$2, so \$2.20 a litre in some cases. It didn't stay that for an entire year, but for that same average home it would cost about \$5,300 a year to heat that home and the electricity use as well. It does have quite a significant impact when you think about displacing that oil usage with something like a heat pump, which is much more efficient technology.

Over the long term, as our electricity grid transitions to one based primarily on renewables and we work towards net zero by 2050, that heat pump technology running off electricity will have an even greater greenhouse gas emission reduction.

The final point I'll make about heat pumps, if I may, is that they do have a cooling option. The efficiency of the technology is not the same for cooling as it is for heating, but with our climate warming such that the need for cooling has become even more important, particularly in low-income buildings and for homeowners and other facilities, long-term care facilities, I wouldn't want to rule out the important benefits of cooling features of heat pumps as well.

LARRY HARRISON: I know a number of people have got the applications from my office. What would be the percentage of the applications that have already been accepted and put in place?

STEPHEN MACDONALD: I don't know if I have that specific percentage. What I can tell you is demand is very high, frankly, with the increasing price of oil in particular. The affordability challenges we've seen across the economy, people are looking for ways to reduce their energy bills and their bills in general. Energy efficiency, heat pump applications, insulation, and other programs we offer can, in fact, help alleviate some of the costs of living. I don't have the specific percentage of applications that are in process, but what I can tell you is that demand is incredibly high.

One of our programs - it's our flagship program for homeowners, not income specific - is called Home Energy Assessment. Maybe some of you have taken advantage of having an audit done of your home. Half way through 2023, we've already exceeded the number of homes we completed in all of 2022 - just to give you an order of magnitude of the demand.

LARRY HARRISON: How does the program contribute to creating green jobs?

STEPHEN MACDONALD: Great question. All of the work - whether it's assessing a home for its energy usage or installing a heat pump or rewiring electrical panels, if that's the case, work across the commercial/industrial sector - is all done by local companies. We are an administrator of efficiency programs. We design them. We do marketing. We do studies and other research to help make sure the programs are as good as they can be in changing, but the actual work is done by local companies.

We have something called our Efficiency Preferred Partners network. It's a listing that customers can go to on our website. It gives you a list of companies that can provide some of the services that homeowners and businessowners need. There were over 330 companies on that list, the last time I looked.

The last time we looked at direct jobs, there were over 2,600. I'm very confident in saying that number has increased in the past year. One of the facts that I think maybe is interesting to me, in any event, is the location of those companies and the areas they serve. More than half of them are located outside HRM. When we look at our participation by

either homes or businesses across the province, there is significant participation throughout Nova Scotia.

LARRY HARRISON: I'm going to hand my remaining time over to MLA Craig.

THE CHAIR: MLA Craig.

HON. STEVE CRAIG: Good morning again, everybody. It's been a very good conversation this morning. I'm probably going to be a little bit more direct in my questioning, perhaps, around programs. I've got a couple of questions. My first is to Executive Director Knight, and that would be housing costs do take a large chunk of an individual's income. We all know that. Regardless of how you measure it, we absolutely know that's the case, and they struggle in paying their energy costs.

Our government recently made investments to supportive housing that included \$1 million in annual funding for Sage House. Ms. Knight, I wonder if you could tell us a little more about the work being done at Sage House.

JOY KNIGHT: I'm very happy to talk about our supportive housing mandate. It's been incredibly successful with our community partners in implementing that. As I mentioned, 417 units in the last two years, which is almost 80 per cent of all the units that exist in the province now created in the last two years. Significant progress has been made.

As part of the framework we've built for the supporting housing approach - the first of its kind developed in the province, done with multiple partners across government, including the Office of Addictions and Mental Health, the Department of Justice, the Department of Health and Wellness, and our community partners - was to build a framework that was - the foundation built in equity. Recognizing that our Indigenous populations are overrepresented in the homeless population, there's significant work that we need to do to support Indigenous communities - Indigenous individuals, as well as African Nova Scotians, who are also overrepresented in the homelessness community - to have safe and affordable housing.

Sage House is a partnership we have with the Mi'kmaw Native Friendship Centre. It provides culturally responsive service to women who have been experiencing chronic homelessness and may suffer or may be challenged with mental health or addictions needs. The Mi'kmaw Native Friendship Centre is able to provide elder support and cultural food programming, as well as traditional services and activities that are needed for the well-being of the women they're serving.

It's a wonderful partnership. It's one of many that we have with the Mi'kmaw Native Friendship Centre. We have the Diamond Bailey House, which opened, which is a \$1.6-million investment by government, which is life-changing for individuals

experiencing homelessness who are Indigenous, as well as a four-plex in Bedford that opened with them.

[11:15 a.m.]

So lots of investments, but we're very cognizant that more needs to be done and we'll continue to work with them to expand housing opportunities.

STEVE CRAIG: Certainly, the work that's being done with the Mi'kmaw Friendship Centre - we just recognized the National Day for Truth and Reconciliation Treaty Day yesterday, and we are now in Mi'kmaw History Month. That's a wonderful thing that we have to do, and we are doing willingly, is to support some of the Indigenous communities. The Mi'kmaw Friendship Centre is absolutely stellar in the work they do.

Along that line, to you, Mr. MacDonald - I'm glad to see that you're experiencing more than 17 seconds of question and response - I also appreciate the fact that you talked about the trending of energy costs going up. They'll continue to go up, even though - two components. One is the unit of energy, whatever that might be, and the price per that unit. Efficiency has a minimum and a maximum. We can only go so far in reducing our energy consumption, knowing full well that costs will continue to go up, so it's very important that we address this topic here today.

In November of last year, our government invested in the Mi'kmaw Home Energy Efficiency Project, which you're involved in. Can you share with us some of the work in progress you're doing to support the Nova Scotia Mi'kmaw communities, as president and CEO of EfficiencyOne?

STEPHEN MACDONALD: I'd be happy to talk about the Mi'kmaw Home Energy Efficiency Project. It's an incredibly important topic. I just met with the Assembly of Nova Scotia Mi'kmaw Chiefs last week to give them an update on the program and to receive feedback from them on how the program is going. I'll start by saying that one of the key features of the program is that it is designed and implemented in partnership and co-operation with all 13 Mi'kmaw communities across the province.

The program itself, to give a bit of a brief overview of it, is for band-owned homes in all communities. The upgrades that are done to the homes are insulation, draft-proofing, heat pump, in some cases a heat recovery unit to help with air circulation and air quality in the home. The homes themselves are selected by each community. Our normal way of doing business, if you will, is to go and find as many homes as we can and try to get people to sign up to programs. For this particular program, the communities themselves determine which homes in which order will receive the upgrades.

The other unique feature of the program is that where possible, we use community-preferred contractors to do the work. If there's either a contractor in the

community who does insulation work, an electrician or a heat pump contractor, which is growing, we'll use that company if they meet safety requirements and have the ability to do the work. In some cases, the bands have contractors they prefer to work with, so we use them, if possible, as well.

The program started in late 2018. Until the end of August, we're at about 1,000 homes that have been upgraded. I don't have the exact number of band-owned homes at the tip of my fingers, but we're of the view that there's still funding available to do many more homes that are in communities but not owned by the bands. The homes have had a very significant impact. Those 1,000 homes are saving over \$1 million a year in energy costs. Those costs are paid for by the bands, so that money can be used for other purposes.

One of the really important facets of energy efficiency is that when you install insulation or a heat pump, you save immediately on your energy bill, but you save for years after that, because the technology stays in place, the insulation stays in the walls. For upgrades like insulation and heat pumps, we use a lifetime - about 20 years. That \$1 million a year is well over \$20 million now that will save the bands, and there are even more homes to be done.

Having said that, there are still improvements we can make to the program. I get lots of really great feedback from the chiefs to make the program better, so we're working on a number of things to try to make it even better, and a better partnership as well.

THE CHAIR: MLA White, and you have one minute and 35.

JOHN WHITE: I don't really want to get into my questions yet, because I don't have enough time to ask them and you won't have enough time to answer them, so I'll jump ahead to one of our bonus questions (laughs). The question is for the Department of Community Services, Ms. Knight. Can you expand on wraparound supports and why they're important to help living situations for people who are in supportive housing?

JOY KNIGHT: Wraparound services are foundational to our supportive housing approach. We take a housing-first approach at Community Services which recognizes the need to remove the barriers to allow people to be housed safely and securely so that they can then stabilize, and have those wraparound services have the best impact possible. That's why supportive housing exists. We want to get people housed, and then once they are there, the trust is built and they're able to start to meet their basic needs, so we can wrap the services around that they need to be successful.

Many of our supportive housing units are actually transitional in nature. We're looking to wrap those services - mental health, housing support, employment support and everything - in place, meet people where they are and help them to move forward with their lives.

THE CHAIR: Perfect timing. Thank you. We will now move to the second round, and with the length of closing remarks and some committee business, we have about six minutes per caucus. MLA Nicoll.

LORELEI NICOLL: Thank you, Madam Chair. I finally get to speak. It's a lot of information and I have 101 questions in my head. Thank you to the Affordable Energy Coalition that's looking at that and Chris, great to see you again. Mayor Mitchell, nice to see you and that you're doing good things in Bridgewater. As you all spoke, you all seemed to be working from a different sound book with regard to data - especially you mentioned the Market Basket Measure, which is Stats Canada - that's federal. I don't know if other people use that. At the end of the day, it would be nice if there were open data that everybody could use and sort of determine who are the most vulnerable. To that point, do you use the Market Basket Measure? Does that influence the threshold that you deem is the income for the most vulnerable in Nova Scotia?

JOY KNIGHT: Those data around poverty rates nationally, as well as for Nova Scotia, broken down by household types are available through Statistics Canada through their household income survey. The latest data would be 2021 data. They update that annually. Those are the data that we're working with, and that helps us to understand best our child poverty rates and our poverty rates for seniors, singles, et cetera. Those are publicly available data that we use. From an MBM perspective, we do use the MBM thresholds when determining if an individual is in poverty or in deep poverty.

LORELEI NICOLL: Please identify what those two levels of income are that you just mentioned, poverty and the other - deep poverty. What is the threshold?

JOY KNIGHT: The thresholds change depending on the region and the household composition. I'd be happy to provide you with the chart that outlines those thresholds.

LORELEI NICOLL: That would be tabled with all of the committee, so we would have that information. Do you feel that the MBM is known by everyone on this table that that's what the Province measures, and is that public on your website and that sort of thing?

Like I said earlier, everyone's using different data and therefore it's becoming more and more complicated trying to address what percentage of people in Nova Scotia are energy-poor. Yes, we all dream of being off fossil fuels. How are we going to get there? Again, data are everything. Therefore, what we're trying to do has to be a collective effort. I know you'll all go away and do your collective thing separately and then, again, trying to sort of - it's not going away and even though you go away separately talking about it, the pandemic brought on something that might not have been foreseen but continues to have an impact.

How often do you look at the MBM? I hate acronyms (laughs). HRM knows that (laughs). Therefore, I just want to know how often you look at the data and say: Oh, that's

a big jump. Therefore it is trying to sort of understand how you feel the need for urgency, which it is right now. There is a need for urgency. To continue to say we're doing this and we're doing that is not enough.

JOY KNIGHT: I would say that we use data to inform everything that we do. There is a multitude of data sources that we access. MBM is our poverty measure. We don't use measures like the low-income measure because, as I mentioned, it is an income measure, not a measure of affordability or poverty. I am confident that the conversations I have with my colleagues within the Department of Community Services and across government - we use MBM, so we're talking apples to apples, as well as with community advocacy groups that I meet with. We use MBM.

I can't speak for the witnesses here, but I can say that data-sharing and conversation and collaboration are critical. You mentioned being siloed in how we work. We are very cognizant that that's not how we can work. I think we've made significant gains and significant progress in how we work differently, and how we recognize that if we're not all at the table together having conversations - sharing best practices, sharing our information - we're not going to achieve the outcomes we all here want to achieve.

By working with Brian, I think we'll receive some really important information and come to some solutions together. I work very closely with the low-income poverty advocate at Nova Scotia Power to understand the challenges that he's working with and he's facing - very regular, as well as other departments in their data sources. Another example would be the federal system for collection of data around individuals experiencing homelessness. Within those data sets, we're able to understand where affordability barriers are actually the key driver of homelessness. We are very cognizant that data are key, and we need to have robust and current data so that we're making the most informed decisions.

THE CHAIR: The time for the Liberal caucus has ceased so we will move on to the NDP caucus and MLA Hansen.

SUZY HANSEN: I'm just reading a bit of the report card on child and family poverty in Nova Scotia. It did say exactly as MLA Maguire has said - that we have the absolute lowest income support packages in the country, and the numbers are really just shameful to see. I'm glad that the executive director mentioned data inform some things that we do because I think that's the work that we do. We need data to inform those things as well. Yet we notice that when we asked about the data on energy poverty with ESIA clients, there weren't really any.

ESIA uses the Market Basket Measure, which includes heat and electricity as a measuring tool. If DCS does not collect the data, how can we measure and compare with accuracy how the department is doing to meet the needs of our Nova Scotians?

JOY KNIGHT: For clarity, we do collect data related to payments that we make for utility arrears, as well as rental arrears. The gap would be in individuals who have had conversations with our caseworkers in which we do not support that, or they may have accessed that through our community agencies. We have a number of our income assistance clients supported through community agencies for diversion funding. We wouldn't know if they access those supports necessarily. I wouldn't know from a data collection perspective; a caseworker would be aware. We are able, and I will provide that information around the funding that's provided on a per-person basis - the number count, as well as the funding that's been approved through the department over the last couple of years.

[11:30 a.m.]

KENDRA COOMBES: This is going to Nova Scotia Power, because unfortunately the Department of Natural Resources is not here, and maybe also to the Affordable Energy Coalition. I'm wondering if first Nova Scotia Power could tell me: The conversations on the universal program, or that panel - did the minister start convening that or have conversations with you before or after CBC started investigating where the panel was at or if it had been convened? I guess my question would be: Were you contacted by the minister prior to CBC poking around or after?

CHRIS LANTEIGNE: I can start and then defer to Mr. Gifford.

From our perspective, we were invited to a working group meeting that took place, as Brian mentioned, about three weeks ago. The invite for that meeting had been sent weeks before that. We did not communicate directly with the minister's office. We were invited by members of the government.

BRIAN GIFFORD: We contacted the Minister of Natural Resources and Renewables early in the year because of the HARP increase - saying, okay, the government's interested in this. We know it's a problem. Let's see if we can work together.

He was positive in his response. He suggested contacting two other departments, and we did meet with one other minister. Then with the fires and everything else, nothing was really moving along, but we did contact them again in the Spring, and they responded in the Summer that they were interested. So we responded to that by initiating it with staff of that department. It was a long process.

KENDRA COOMBES: My question would be, if this - I find it concerning that you brought forward this concept, which I think is a concept that can help a lot of Nova Scotians, and the response was positive. Again, the Department of Natural Resources and Renewables is not here for us to ask: Why did it take so long? Even aside from the natural disasters that we had, sometimes government has to walk and chew gum at the same time in order to govern. I just don't understand why there was no walking and chewing gum at

the same time. Why can't we be dealing - prior to the natural disaster of Fiona, the natural disasters - I don't understand why the Department of Natural Resources and Renewables and others did not convene. I am sorry that they didn't, because this is something that would have been very beneficial to Nova Scotians to have come this time or in budget session. But I want to thank you for your work.

If he'd like to respond, it's his.

BRIAN GIFFORD: I agree. It would have been really beneficial to have this earlier on, so that we could have affected the coming year. That's what we would've liked to see. Having said that, we're very happy that it has started. We're hoping it will affect things for future years.

THE CHAIR: We will now move to the PC caucus with six minutes.

JOHN WHITE: We're here talking about poverty. Can we take a minute and talk about initiatives to help lift people out of poverty? I know not everybody on income assistance is able to work, but some are. Can you tell us anything about incentives that may be in place to help people enter the workforce?

JOY KNIGHT: We have a number of initiatives within the Department of Community Services, and employment support services that are focused on helping people to engage in the workplace. Being cognizant that when we talk about that and support income assistance clients and their families, we need to do it in a way that supports them and supports them to their best ability to participate in employment. It doesn't necessarily mean full-time work. It might mean volunteering to start and moving to part-time employment, or it may mean part-time employment permanently. We really want to assess and meet people where they are and build on their strengths and help them to engage in a way that works best for them.

We do have a number of initiatives under way. One of them we are calling Elevate ESS. It is a targeted multi-year initiative in the department to best support individuals to engage in employment. We recognize that there is a labour market shortage in many sectors right now. We have clients who are eager to work. They just need the right supports to be successful in that. We've had some great partnerships with national organizations as well as provincial organizations to hire and work with specific training programs for income assistance clients, which includes Canada Post. We've had a number of clients with disabilities hired there, and Sysco and a number of other organizations in the construction sector as well, who have been wonderful partners and have provided really meaningful work to our clients.

This multi-year initiative, Elevate ESS, is also focused on how we expand our programming from an employment perspective to youth - not just youth who are attached as dependants of our clients but also youth from low-income households. Recent

investment this year - \$6.2 million - has allowed us to expand our mandate to low-income households, so now all of our programs and services for young people are for anybody who is experiencing poverty-related challenges, whether they're attached to Community Services or not.

For us, that is a game changer. We know that young people in low-income households experience a lot of the same challenges and barriers that people who are attached to income assistance face. Those programs and services are now available. A lot of them launched this Summer and are having a huge impact. Those programs help support getting a first job, understanding your career path and career development, as well as planning and attending post-secondary. We do have a program with the Nova Scotia Community College that we've partnered with to deliver grants to dependents of our clients to attend NSCC. It covers 50 per cent of tuition costs, as well as all supplies and fees. We have had record uptake on that program this year.

We're really pleased with the outcomes that we're seeing. We think holistically about our employment programming. We understand that it's a continuum and a journey for some people who are maybe a little further from the labour market. We're ensuring that the supports and services we have, and the training and skills of our caseworker, are there to help people move along and improve their own adequacy work where it makes sense.

JOHN WHITE: You went right into my next question on me. I was interested in what we're doing for youth. In Glace Bay, we do see a lot of intergenerational poverty, so I'm glad to hear you talking about that. I think I might have to pick your brain on some more information later.

We understand that fuel and power costs are not set by the Province. What things are the department doing - and government - to help offset the price of fuel right now? That is what we're talking about here today.

JOY KNIGHT: Government has two programs that are dedicated to that through other departments. There is the HARP, which was increased, as has been discussed, and had a significant positive impact, obviously. Income assistance clients would have been - many would have been eligible for that, and it was very well received. There's also the Home Energy Assistance Top-up Fund delivered by the Salvation Army, which helps a lot of low-income Nova Scotians pay their utility arrears and heat-related arrears.

The last is the diversion funding that we've talked about here that's provided to our community agencies to deliver on our behalf. It provides that one-time relief for individuals who have utility or rental arrears.

JOHN WHITE: I really don't know to do with one minute and 16 seconds. I really thank you for coming in today and giving us some information. I've heard the Opposition say this again today, and I do believe that we all wear this. All parties wear this. There is no

doubt about that. I really do hope that somewhere among conversations like this, we can find some kind of solution.

In my heart, I believe there are people who could use these programs that we just talked about - incentives to get people back to work - and I think there are people who are just not going back to work, for various reasons, and we need to find ways to support them as well. It's just where we're at today. I think it's very complicated, and I'm glad to hear that we have so many different opinions at the table - in this board here today, even - to help us sort this out. Thank you very much.

THE CHAIR: Thank you for being here today as witnesses. I do have a little bit of time set aside if people did want to give very brief closing remarks. I see Mr. MacDonald would like to begin.

STEPHEN MACDONALD: I would stick my hand up first as an advantage to go first.

I'd like to make two points in closing. The first is that earlier on in some of my remarks I gave some examples of the average cost to heat a home, based on different prices of oil. Members of the committee may recall that I used numbers like \$3,300 a year at \$1 a litre, increasing to over \$5,000 at over \$2 per litre price of oil.

What I want to take a moment to mention is the impact that efficiency programs can have on reducing that bill. That same average home that goes through our HomeWarming program - the HomeWarming program is for low-income homeowners. It provides upgrades at no cost - insulation, draft-proofing, heat pumps. The average home will see a reduction of \$1,800 a year in average on their energy bills. In some cases, it can cut that energy bill in half. As a reminder, those upgrades last for many years. Over a 20-year period, that \$1,800 will add up to about \$36,000. It has a significant impact. I just wanted to make sure that in addition to pointing out the challenges with the cost of energy based on rising fuel prices, there are programs that can mitigate that.

The second point I'd like to make in closing is just to thank all MLAs. Over the years, MLAs of all parties, through their constituency offices and their other work, have been big advocates of energy efficiency programs, been an important mechanism to get the word out about programs and how to enroll. I just want to extend a thank you to everyone around this table and all members of the Legislature.

LIA MACDONALD: Thank you again for the opportunity to be here today. We are grateful for the feedback and the guidance of the low-income advisory group, many of whom are here today, including the discussion today. It's all been very informative. These folks provide expert guidance and counsel to inform our efforts about how to help low-income Nova Scotians and our commitment to providing reliable, safe power,

managing our costs for everybody. That is our ultimate goal and that's what we're all steadfastly dedicated to at Nova Scotia Power.

We know there is still work to do. We remain steadfast in that commitment to our communities, and we will continue to work together to address this complicated situation.

JOY KNIGHT: Thank you very much for having me here today. I'll just reiterate my commitment to working with all of you, your constituents, and all low-income Nova Scotians on how we move forward and support them the best way we can.

DAVID MITCHELL: I hope you'll just indulge me for a moment, because I actually need to express my frustration. When I was first invited to speak to this committee, I was excited to be able to share the municipal perspective on this important topic. After a couple of rescheduling conflicts, I was excited that this date was confirmed. Most of us received information that said we had five to 10 minutes to give our opening remarks - not a lot, but enough to sort of scratch the surface for what's happening in Bridgewater and municipalities. I spent hours on that. Then to drive all the way in from Bridgewater to find out that I have two minutes, and then sit here for an hour and 45 minutes in absolute silence while not one person asked about the municipal perspective on this crisis that we're living in in energy poverty is incredibly disappointing.

If you had asked, talked about housing, you would learn that we are excited by the announcement of the affordable housing being built by the Province, but after seven years of talking to successive governments about our infrastructure challenges, we don't know if we can approve the affordable housing that's being proposed in Bridgewater, because we don't have the wastewater capacity.

Talk about wraparound services - and Ms. Knight did a great job of explaining that, but if you asked for the municipal perspective, you would learn that we have a coordinated access system that navigates people who are experiencing homelessness or energy crisis, energy poverty through this process, which is very complicated, to make sure that they can get through it. You would also learn that in municipalities like Bridgewater - the economic engine of the South Shore with an incredible regional hospital - police are our only 24/7 mental health support system. If you have a mental health crisis outside business hours in the Town of Bridgewater, it is a police officer who has to help you.

All of that got missed because nobody asked a single question from the municipal perspective. We can't solve these problems, we can't have lasting solutions, if we aren't all communicating with each other. So I hope going forward that every member from every party and all these incredible people who have expressed their thoughts today will take the time to speak to municipalities, because we are the ones on the ground every single day. I have to pass people living under bridges to get to my office. I have to pass a soup kitchen to get to my office. These are the people whom I engage with, so I'm as much a part of the solution as you are, and more and more I'm feeling like we are being excluded.

[11:45 a.m.]

CHRIS BENJAMIN: I will just put in another plug for universal service programs. They have worked well elsewhere addressing this issue. It is complicated, as Mayor Mitchell just indicated. Multiple levels of governments, multiple frustrations, but universal service programs are a tangible way to address the specific issue of energy poverty. I really appreciate my colleague Brian's work over many years advocating with many governments on that issue. I'm really happy that we're getting a bit of traction right now, and I hope all parties will support such a program. I'll just put in one last plug to please remember renters and other low-income households to include them in the processes. Whatever your proposed solutions are, include those voices. They're the ones who are the true experts.

BRIAN GIFFORD: I really appreciated your comments, Mayor Mitchell. We are in a climate crisis at the same time as a short-term cost of living crisis. Because of the climate crisis, our energy systems are going through a massive and necessary transition to carbon-free energy and deep energy efficiency helps solve both crises.

We know energy bills are causing serious problems for low- and modest-income Nova Scotians right now. We know we can stop that with low-income efficiency and heat pump installations and with a program to provide energy bill credits for low- and modest-income households until their home bills drop due to the efficiency upgrades. Now is the time to seize the moment and tackle energy poverty once and for all. We must make sure no one is left behind while we transition to a zero-carbon economy.

THE CHAIR: We are going to have a little bit of committee business. Again, thanks for being here today as our witnesses. I appreciate you coming. I'm going to call for a very, very quick one-minute recess so that you guys can -

[11:46 a.m. The committee recessed.]

[11:50 a.m. The committee reconvened.]

THE CHAIR: Order. I'm calling the Community Services Committee back to order. Under committee business, the motion made by the PC caucus: second topic must be re-read for public record as it was illegible on Hansard. I look toward the PC caucus of who is going to do the motion.

TOM TAGGART: I move that the second topic for the PC caucus be Update on the Economic and Cultural Impact of Hosting the North American Indigenous Games in 2023 with the following witnesses: North American Indigenous Games Host Society, Brendon Smithson; chair of the North American Indigenous Games Host Society, Fiona Fitzpatrick Parsons; and President of the North American Indigenous Games Host Society, Tex Marshall.

THE CHAIR: All those in favour of the motion? Contrary minded? Thank you.

The motion is carried.

The second item for committee business is Jamie O'Neill is no longer the chair of Shelter Nova Scotia. Lynn Hartwell currently holds that role. It's on the topic addressing the homelessness crisis. We are just asking if it's okay for Jamie O'Neill to be the witness. Any discussion on that? (Interruption) Excuse me, yes, so that Lynn Hartwell can be the witness instead of Jamie O'Neill. (Interruption) Seeing no discussion, so the clerk has noted that change.

We have all been presented with the annual report for this committee. I'm wondering if everyone's had a chance to look it over and if there's any discussion on the report.

TOM TAGGART: I have a motion if you're ready. Okay. I move that the Human Resources Committee accept the annual report as written.

THE CHAIR: Is there any discussion?

AN HON. MEMBER: Community Services.

THE CHAIR: Community Services.

AN HON. MEMBER: You're on too many committees today, Taggart.

TOM TAGGART: I apologize. (Laughter) I move that the Human Resources Committee . . .

THE CHAIR: No. (Laughter, interruptions)

TOM TAGGART: Community Services Committee (laughs) accept the annual report as written.

THE CHAIR: Is there any discussion on the motion? Seeing none.

All those in favour? Contrary minded? Thank you.

The motion is carried.

I myself did add a thing under committee business. We forgot to discuss last month that our committee meeting in January falls on the second. Those of us who sit on the HR Committee changed that to Thursday the 11th in the afternoon. My thoughts and suggestion would be to have it that morning as some of us are travelling into the city for the HR

Committee. (Interruption) We did double-check, and that's fine, so if everyone is in favour . . . I'll give MLA Maguire a minute . . . (Interruption) You're good? (Interruptions) Would I need a motion? If we're all in agreement, then the clerk will be able to invite witnesses for the morning of Thursday, January 11th beginning at 10:00 a.m.

Is there any other committee business for discussion? Okay, then the next topic and date is November 7th. However, we probably are going to be in the Legislature, so if we are, there will be no Community Services Committee meeting that date, and our next date would be December 5, 2023. The topic for that is Supports for Community Centres, Infrastructure and Facilities. The witnesses coming are the Department of Communities, Culture, Tourism and Heritage; Community Facilities Improvement Program; and the Community Generator Program.

That covers all of the committee business so I would like to say that the meeting is adjourned.

[The committee adjourned at 11:54 a.m.]