

HANSARD

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STANDING COMMITTEE

ON

COMMUNITY SERVICES

Thursday, January 11, 2024

Committee Room

Supports for Low-Income Nova Scotians and the Impact of Inflation

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COMMUNITY SERVICES COMMITTEE

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[Kendra Coombes was replaced by Lisa Lachance.]

In Attendance:

Erin Fowler
Legislative Counsel

Tamer Nusseibeh
Legislative Committee Clerk

WITNESSES

Department of Community Services

Melissa MacKinnon
Deputy Minister

Joy Knight
Executive Director, Employment Support and Income Assistance

Feed Nova Scotia

Nick Jennery
Executive Director



HALIFAX, TUESDAY, JANUARY 11, 2024

STANDING COMMITTEE ON COMMUNITY SERVICES

10:00 A.M.

CHAIR

Melissa Sheehy-Richard

VICE CHAIR

John White

THE CHAIR: Order. I call to order the Standing Committee on Community Services. I am Melissa Sheehy-Richard. I'm the MLA for Hants West and Chair of this committee. Today, we will hear from presenters regarding Supports for Low-Income Nova Scotians and the Impact of Inflation.

Just a reminder for everyone to turn their phones on silent. In case of an emergency, we will use the Granville Street exit and walk up to Grand Parade.

I would now like to welcome committee members to introduce themselves, beginning to my left with MLA White.

[The committee members introduced themselves.]

THE CHAIR: I also would like to note the presence of Legislative Counsel Erin Fowler to my left, and Legislative Committee Clerk Tamer Nusseibeh to my right.

Supports for Low-Income Nova Scotians and the Impact of Inflation. I want to welcome the witnesses here today and ask them to introduce themselves, beginning with Deputy Minister MacKinnon.

[The witnesses introduced themselves.]

THE CHAIR: At this time, I would welcome Deputy Minister MacKinnon to bring her opening remarks.

MELISSA MACKINNON: Good morning. Joining me today is Joy Knight, Executive Director of Employment Supports and Income Assistance, and my thanks to Mr. Jennery for being here to discuss this important issue.

There is no question that the cost of living is a challenge for many. Rising food costs and inflation are part of an interconnected series of issues that are putting pressure on Nova Scotians every day. Many of the factors creating these issues are complex global problems that societies all over the world are facing, but even if these issues are bigger than our province, Nova Scotians are very vulnerable to the effects, especially given these challenging few years.

We need to work together across government departments, with the private sector, volunteers, and with our community partners to make sure people have access to the supports they need. We are fortunate to have dedicated partners like Feed Nova Scotia working alongside us in this effort.

One of our main goals as a department is to help our clients develop increased resiliency and self-sufficiency. We recognize that as the economic landscape shifts, the way people access supports is also changing. A key focus for our department is ensuring our work aligns with these changes, and that community organizations have the resources they need to help people at the local level.

Over the last few months, significant investments have been made to increase supports to people with disabilities, families with children, to address and prevent homelessness, develop supportive housing, and reduce food insecurity. Government recently announced a new funding stream to support income assistance clients with a disability or serious medical condition. Beginning in May, the Income Assistance Disability Supplement will provide an additional \$300 per month to eligible people on income assistance who are not currently in the Disability Support Program. This investment will benefit more than 60 per cent of individuals currently receiving income assistance.

Government has increased the Nova Scotia Child Benefit, and the department is currently rolling out the PATH program, a \$3.9 million investment geared to financially support young people leaving the care of the minister to better position them for adulthood. We are also creating 15 new youth outreach worker positions that will provide day-to-day living supports such as finding and maintaining a suitable place to live, teaching skills required to live independently, and providing opportunities to build supportive and safe connections and attachments in the community. A new youth outreach plus program will offer intensive clinical supports for youth with complex needs, and the last budget invested an additional \$6.2 million to improve and expand employment support programs.

With the current affordability challenges, and more Nova Scotians struggling well beyond those who are clients of the Department of Community Services, many of the levers and supports for low-income Nova Scotians exist outside of the department: rent supplements; increases to the Seniors Care Grant program; the Heating Assistance Rebate Program; school lunch programs; food carts through the Department of Agriculture; expanding broadband; accessibility and community sport and recreation supports through the Department of Communities, Culture, Tourism and Heritage; and many programs and services through community partners like libraries.

Government has provided an additional \$7 million in funding in the last six months to food banks and food security organizations across Nova Scotia. As you will hear from my colleague Mr. Jennery, the need has never been greater.

We also know that poverty, income inequity, and systemic racism are some of the fundamental drivers of food insecurity. To help address this, we have funded partners to create community-led food networks in Eskasoni, Cumberland County, and East Preston. These pilots are part of the department's efforts to better understand what works best in addressing food insecurity more holistically, recognizing that food insecurity doesn't exist in isolation from other needs and challenges. Government has also provided Nova Scotia's 26 family resource centres with \$100,000 each to support food-related needs of families.

We are concurrently dealing with the urgency of these acute needs, while recognizing that a preventive focus is critical to help support individuals and families into the future. This approach requires a long-term commitment and collective efforts. The work under way related to addressing the social determinants of health, through Solution Six of the Action for Health plan, is a good example of this.

There is much more to do, and we will continue to work to identify and implement further measures to help Nova Scotians.

THE CHAIR: I would welcome Mr. Jennery to make some remarks.

NICK JENNERY: Good morning. I appreciate the opportunity to come speak with all of you here this morning. Thank you to the committee.

I apologize in advance for my informality, dress code-wise. I had a wardrobe incident this morning, and I couldn't course-correct. (Laughter) I learned it from Janet Jackson, I guess.

I would also like to recognize the deputy minister and the executive director of the Department of Community Services beside me. They were particularly helpful during the years of COVID-19 when we couldn't raise funds, we couldn't have in-person meetings, and we had supply chain disruptions. Together with Community Services, we put together a food-distribution system - a home-delivery program. I just wanted to recognize that.

In 2017, at the Standing Committee on Community Services, we stated, “we cannot feed our way out of this crisis . . . people in need do not have enough money to pay for the basics such as food.”

In 2022, we appeared in front of the Public Accounts Committee and said, “The problem isn’t just that food has gone up. It’s that income hasn’t kept pace.”

A year ago, in 2023, we appeared again in front of the Standing Committee on Community Services and said, “Lining up at a charity for a basic human right is not food security. People need income.”

We’ve been sounding the alarm for many years, and here I am again today, telling you that 2023 was another record-breaking year for food banks in our province. We’ve seen a 26 per cent increase in food bank usage across Nova Scotia during this past year. Some regions are being completely overwhelmed. Cape Breton food banks, for instance, have seen a 50 per cent increase year over year in the number of people they are serving - 50 per cent. Seventy-seven per cent of food bank clients listed the high cost of housing and food as their reason for needing support. This has increased from 48 per cent just two years ago.

We’ve also, from a Feed Nova Scotia standpoint, increased the amount of food that we are distributing by 28 per cent. This last month, in December, we distributed almost 260,000 kilograms of food. It was an awesome effort by both staff and volunteers just to try to meet the demand.

Food banks across the province are being faced with a difficult choice of either giving out less food or turning away new clients. As we’ve all said, telling government that food insecurity in our province has reached new highs is not new. People need more income and affordable housing to live a healthy and dignified life.

We’ve been explaining the root causes needing to be addressed before we can see any improvement in the quality for Nova Scotians. My question today is: What do I need to say to all of you for there to be real, measurable action taken to reduce food insecurity in our province? We are too focused on outputs and not outcomes. A program is launched here, a one-time top-up over there. Even in our own case, we’re measuring kilograms and funds raised. But when you look at people, that’s the outcome. That’s what we all need to focus on.

What numbers do I need to provide you that you haven’t seen already? How many more times do we need to be invited before the standing committee to say that charity is not the answer?

Nova Scotia is the only province to have received an F grade on the Food Banks Canada Poverty Report Card, which pointed out that we haven’t had an updated provincial

poverty reduction plan in place since 2009. We've seen one-off payments, we've seen tax benefits, we've seen government support programs, but they're not keeping up with inflation, and they're certainly not keeping people off the streets or out of the food banks.

Thousands of Nova Scotians are being forced to live in inhumane conditions and rely on the goodwill of their community to survive. The numbers that I shared with you in the two-pager - the numbers that we're talking about now - this is not the majority of people who are food insecure. The majority of people who are food insecure, many of them have lost hope. They're isolated. They're disconnected from community. They don't put their hand up for support. They don't walk in through the doors of the food bank, and frankly, those are the people I'm most concerned about.

The Action for Health plan includes a directive to prioritize and collaborate across government to address the social determinants of health. We are two years into the rollout of this plan and have yet to see any real prioritization or collaboration in addressing inadequate income, long recognized as the primary determinant of health. We haven't seen any indication of a measurable, time-bound plan for how we start to reverse the disturbing trend of double-digit increases in food bank use every year.

What I did see during the holiday period is Nova Scotians, communities, individuals, and businesses. They set a goal, they share that goal, and in sharing that goal, you realize what it's going to take to deliver that goal. They measure their progress and more often than not, they exceed it. We saw it in what is affectionately called "Colby North," where they set up some Santas on the front yard, and as my colleague over here would know better than I do, they set a goal of \$500. Then it was \$5,000, \$10,000, and it's now \$41,000.

To me, this is something that we all should look at and take some inspiration from in setting a goal that everybody can align around so that all of us - charities, businesses, individual Nova Scotians, government - can determine what part they play in reaching that goal. All of you have run election campaigns, and no doubt you set a goal right at the very beginning. Then you put in place the people needed to deliver that. It sounds so basic, and I don't mean to preach on this one, but I think that is the biggest deliverable that could reverse the trend that we're seeing right now.

I do believe that a better future is possible, but charities don't have the resources to make that future a reality, nor do I think they should have. We know Nova Scotians show up for their neighbours through fires, floods, hurricanes. We have seen it time and time again that this is a province of helpers, but the helpers are burnt out, and too many of them are struggling to make ends meet.

I would just finish by saying that food insecurity, I believe, is a political choice and a result of a failure to act in the face of overwhelming evidence. What if in 2024 we tried something different? What if we took a hard look at the way we're doing things and

humbly accept that it isn't working? Maybe 2024 can be the year that we get honest, that we get brave, and we take bold actions. Nova Scotians deserve a life of safety, dignity, and health. Let's be the province where that kind of life is a possibility for everyone.

THE CHAIR: We will now move over to questions. We do this in a 20-20-20 format. I just want to remind witnesses and the committee members to wait until your microphone is red and I've identified you before speaking. At this point I will turn it over to the Liberal caucus and MLA Nicoll.

[10:15 a.m.]

LORELEI NICOLL: Thank you, Mr. Jennery, for your comments. You've summed it up very well, and coming in today, trying to determine the level of frustration for the people who are out there needing help. You've very much amplified that, and I thank you for that because we always wonder about the root causes of or how we got to be here. Yes, we are a giving community.

You mentioned the Santa Clauses in the riding I represent, which was just a couple of people who wanted to give back. Then there's another woman in the community who started a community fridge, so therefore is doing that. There are a lot of people giving back to the community, trying to help, yet we do see the people unhoused. Therefore, how do we respond to that? To your point, it's always been about income at the end of the day, and the services required.

Your last year's budget, which you've basically repeated today - you laid out some staggering numbers, how many people are impacted by food insecurity. It was 17.7 per cent of citizens, or one in six households are food insecure. We know the cost of living has continued to rise more and more. People across the province are struggling in a staggering number - around 77 per cent of the people visiting food banks. We are hearing it in our communities. As I said, the cost of rent, food, heating, and now another 7 per cent increase on power bills is affecting many Nova Scotians.

Could you talk more about the cost of living directly impacting Feed Nova Scotia and the people you interact with every day with regard to the pressures that they're feeling? It's paying the other bills, that they can't afford to buy food, et cetera.

NICK JENNERY: When we register people at the 82 food banks where we monitor the statistics, we asked them such questions as what their primary source of income is. What we have noticed is that where 16 per cent in 2019 identified employment as their primary source of income, that 16 per cent is now 21 per cent. Despite having employment, it's not enough to make ends meet. If I look at the percentage of newcomers to our province, back in 2019, 7 per cent of food bank clients were newcomers to our province. That's now 20 per cent in 2023. All of these statistics indicate a concern.

It's not difficult to do the math. If you're on income assistance - which my colleagues to my right can explain better than I can - and then you subtract from that rent and utilities, maybe some basics such as medications and things like that, you don't really have an awful lot of money left over. What we do see is that people's food budget becomes a discretionary line item as opposed to something that I think, frankly, should be a fixed line item because we will never get healthy communities until we have people in a healthy state.

LORELEI NICOLL: Again to Feed Nova Scotia, you talked about how many clients you have are single people on income assistance. You also mentioned that the most in need are all the people you find in isolation who don't ask for help. That was always my concern. Some people, for various reasons - their pride, being humble - always felt that they could be resourceful and look after themselves.

How do you factor in or figure out how many of those people who are out there in need, but that you are concerned they're in isolation, that they're most vulnerable? Those who know where to find assistance is one thing, but I just wondered about those people in particular. Those are the people who you would really like to reach out to. So I just wondered how you can determine who they are. Because at the end of the day - coming out and saying it - but the decision of this government to freeze income assistance has directly impacted the people you're serving across the province.

I'm just wondering, again: If it comes down to income, and then the people who are in isolation, they're not going to be necessarily aware of the fact that they need more income.

NICK JENNERY: I would say that there have been several studies on food insecurity. I'm thinking of PROOF, which was a department at the University of Toronto, which has done extensive research on this. They identified that the majority of people who are moderately or severely food-insecure will not reach out for help from food banks, shelters, or meal programs.

I would temper that a little bit by saying that during COVID-19, when we saw a lot of people not having access to food, it became less of a stigma. There was less judgment involved. I think we're still seeing that a little bit today, that it shouldn't be the embarrassment and shame and that feeling of being judged as perhaps it was three or four years ago. It's hard to estimate it, but I think you're safe in saying that if we're supporting 55,000 individual Nova Scotians through the network that Feed Nova Scotia supports, there are at least another 55,000 who have not reached out for help.

We also experienced during the first two years of COVID-19 - when thanks to the support from the Department of Community Services, we set up this home-delivery program, there were many more people, new people, who found that experience to be less stigmatizing than going to a traditional food bank.

So there is a shift in attitude, but I would still say we're only looking at 50 per cent of the numbers here.

LORELEI NICOLL: I guess to cut to the chase, I'm going to go to the Department of Community Services and ask why, when the most universal ways to help low-income Nova Scotians during this cost-of-living crisis would be to increase income assistance, government has frozen income assistance for the last two years. We're a couple months away from the budget. Is the department going to request an increase in income assistance for 2024-25?

MELISSA MACKINNON: I assure you it's always a priority for us to lay out some of these concerns for our minister and our decision-makers, of course. I think evidence of that is the recent \$53 million investment in increasing rates for those with disabilities. That means that over 60 per cent of income assistance clients will receive an additional \$300 per month - that's individually, not per household - starting in April. The minister made that announcement last month.

Anything else would be considered through the budget.

LORELEI NICOLL: I'm not going to give my opinion on that response. I know that you're always going to try, but I guess I'm trying to get a commitment that you will be asking for an increase in income assistance in 2024-25. As Mr. Jennery said, income hasn't kept pace. Therefore, why won't the government index income assistance to inflation so that it does keep pace, which would support low-income Nova Scotians?

MELISSA MACKINNON: I appreciate that question. Again, I can assure you that we are always advocating for increases to our programs and demonstrable ways to make a difference in the lives of Nova Scotians. I think that question would be a good question for the Deputy Minister of Finance and Treasury Board or the Minister of Finance and Treasury Board as well.

These committee sittings are very helpful in helping our colleagues understand what we're seeing out there and what you're seeing in MLA offices and recognizing that this isn't solely a problem of the Department of Community Services. We're hearing that there are more people outside of our clients who are facing these issues, and that means it has to be a broad systemic approach to helping to solve them.

I would also say, just to build on Mr. Jennery's remarks about looking at the ways that people are accessing food, that's a really important piece to us, recognizing the stigma that can come with that, and that there's that hidden food insecurity, hidden homelessness, that we're not seeing. That's why we're taking an approach of trying to build food and food programming into all of our programs at the Department of Community Services. If you're accessing income assistance employment support programs, you have access to food. If

you visit a family resource centre, you have access to food. You may be there for another reason, but if you're there and you need food, you get it.

Those things are very important to us, and I hope we'll have an opportunity through this session to also talk about our community food networks, which we're piloting - actively trying to bring people in in a way that they connect to other supports, not just government supports but regular community supports, to people, to address social isolation, to get at some of those root issues as well.

LORELEI NICOLL: Thank you for bringing that up because that was my next question - trying to figure out the coordination between Feed Nova Scotia and everything that you're doing. I will give you the opportunity to talk about your community food networks so we get a proper understanding. Everyone around this table, as elected people, gets regular phone calls in our offices asking for help. The better we understand the network, the better off we are. As a segway into another thing with regard to the unhoused situation as well, HRM is trying to do all that they can. I listened to a video by Max Chauvin, and he said that a quarter of the unhoused are DCS clients. I just wondered if you could expand on that.

MELISSA MACKINNON: I'll start with trying to give a sense of our approach to food insecurity, which I think I touched on, within the Department of Community Services before I come back to the community food networks. Maybe I can just shed a bit of light and respond to Mr. Jennery's comments, of which I'm certainly not in disagreement. I think we at Community Services, and I know my colleagues in other departments - and I indicated this to him earlier this week - would be more than happy to have a discussion about what those goals can be, and how we collectively set them and reach them, then essentially how we engage community, the private sector, and other levels of government try to reach them.

We are relying too much on volunteers. I certainly saw that in my previous role at the Department of Communities, Culture, Tourism and Heritage. We know that our volunteers are aging and they're tired. In many cases, we're asking them to - there's a significant amount of funding in food insecurity that's available, but I would say it's not as well-coordinated as it should be, to say the least. We're asking volunteers and organizations to apply to, say, four or five different pots of money just to achieve their goals, which is an area, I think, that is ultimately up to government to decide to create a broad target or strategy. There are things that we can do now that will make a difference, and that's one of them.

Maybe I would just, if the committee would permit, ask Ms. Knight to expand a bit on the community food network pilots.

THE CHAIR: Ms. Knight.

JOY KNIGHT: We have three pilots currently in the province. This is, again, building on Mr. Jennery's comments around destigmatizing access to food and for those who - it was mentioned some people are severely food insecure and not wanting to come forward, not wanting to ask for help. We absolutely recognize and appreciate why people wouldn't want to do that, and also appreciating that longer-term solutions are needed. We need some solutions now to support Nova Scotians while we're working on the longer-term solutions. I believe that collaborative food networks can play a really important role in that space.

[10:30 a.m.]

We have three locations. One in Eskasoni; one in Preston Township; and one in the Cumberland County-Amherst area. I'll just give you a few highlights of two of the sites, just so you can understand the uniqueness of what the networks are, and why we're making investments in this space. There are some guiding principles around these pilots, and that is to ensure we are moving in a different direction around a stigmatized model of access to food. We want it to be about choice, nutrition, versatility, flexibility, cultural responsiveness, affordability, and human dignity. Human dignity - really thinking, again, about how we not damage a person's self-esteem when they need to access food. How do we lift them up and be more holistic in the approach that we take, wrap services around people when they're accessing food?

As the deputy minister mentioned, people who have needs related to food often have other needs in their lives. How do we bring all of those resources to bear in a space where they're accessing food? And at all times, how do we ensure being first-voice-informed so that we're building a network - across Nova Scotia, we hope - that is led by and designed by the communities it's intended to serve?

One of the other core principles of the network is that it's a very low-cost initiative. It's intended to actually leverage the assets that exist in a community. To your point earlier around how community wants to be involved, and is really stepping in and stepping up, how do we bring that effort and that goodwill together with our partners and government-funded partners to use all of those assets for one collective effort? That's really the intention of the networks.

Just a couple of specific highlights, because it's really exciting work and it's doing a really good job of helping people access food in a place in which they feel that it's culturally responsive. It brings them in from a social isolation perspective to connect them to community and connect them to other services.

In the Preston community, we have an Afrocentric approach to how that's been designed. It is completely community-led and community-designed, and it has resulted in a wonderful program that's bringing in hundreds of people every week to access services, in a broad range of services.

Just a few highlights: They have coffee chats, where you, of course, can access a meal, but what they bring in then is VON to talk about their services. They have clinics on Alzheimer's and on diabetes and on financial management, as well as other programs, particularly to help seniors in the community. They have a program for nutritional supplements, where they bring in health care providers to do assessments around those who may need nutritional supplements, and then the food network delivers it to people's homes. They have a youth cooking class for ages 7 to 16, which is really helping to bring in younger generations to learn about food security, but also to make connections into some of our DCS employment-related programming: career-development programming and things like that for them. We have emergency grocery orders, and right now they're working on a breakfast program pilot at Auburn Drive High School.

THE CHAIR: My apologies, Ms. Knight. MLA Kerr would like to ask a question. There are two minutes remaining. MLA Kerr.

CARMAN KERR: I'm sorry to interrupt. I've got several questions to ask. I wish we had more time. I'll try to get a couple in in two minutes.

Mr. Jennery, you mentioned that food shouldn't be a discretionary line item; it should be a fixed line item. I agree. Our team agrees. We've been pushing for a universal lunch program for a long time now and asking government to implement that. We think it would provide universal and equitable access to all students, especially those experiencing child poverty.

I know Nourish Nova Scotia is involved in the breakfast program, and I know you know that. Could you comment on a potential universal lunch program and how that may help those kids in need?

NICK JENNERY: I would support pretty much any initiative that increases access to food, particularly for the kids whom we see. I mean, a third of people going to food banks are kids under the age of 18. We also have food banks in our network that discreetly deliver food to schools, to the teachers, to be discreetly distributed, because there are some kids who just don't have food. Teachers are all too aware that kids can't learn and listen if they're hungry.

Any initiative that supports all kids having food so that they can learn and grow as we all expect them to will get no argument from me, for sure. I would like to see something coordinated, something cost-effective, as opposed to a little bit of the piecemeal approach that we're seeing around the province. I think there are efficiencies to be gained if we do that.

THE CHAIR: Order. Perfect timing on the answer.

We will now move over to the NDP caucus and, I believe, MLA Hansen.

SUZY HANSEN: I'm just going to take a little breather because I was really taken aback by Feed Nova Scotia providing food for schools, which I think is absolutely wonderful, in a discreet way. This government is stating that all kids get access to food in schools when they need it, and it shouldn't be through Feed Nova Scotia. No disregard to that, I am just taken aback.

Let me get to questioning. I was here last year when your organization presented - a year ago almost to the day - where we discussed the impact of the cost of living crisis on vulnerable Nova Scotians and those living on income assistance. At this meeting a year ago, you recommended a substantial increase to income assistance payments, stating that an annual \$1,000 increase would reduce the possibility of food insecurity by 5 per cent. We know that did not happen in last year's budget, and we did ask about that during the budget session.

Can you describe the potential food insecurity impact of this year's budget also if it does not increase income assistance rates?

NICK JENNERY: I would say two points. Until we index our various support programs, we will continue to push people who are already in poverty deeper into poverty because inflation just keeps piling up and it just makes things more difficult. The other thing I would say is that those numbers came from some substantial research from the University of Toronto, I think. Again, it's the PROOF department that works collaboratively with other provinces. I think the return on investment is absolutely there. If the humanity of not helping people have access to food doesn't move you, then I think there's a very strong business case for investing in people so they can realize their full potential, whether they're kids or whether they're adults.

SUZY HANSEN: I appreciate that. I do agree as well. We need to invest in people, and that's where we're losing focus right now. These are our priorities, and we need to really start focusing on the needs of those folks who are in need the most right now.

At that meeting, you also stated that increasing the minimum wage by \$1 would decrease the incidence of food insecurity by 5 per cent, and you have previously advocated for a minimum wage set close to that of a living wage, which we have done as well. Do you feel that the recently announced increase to \$15.20 an hour in 2024 will be sufficient to meet the cost of living structures on low-income Nova Scotians?

NICK JENNERY: I would say until we have income that starts to get close to what is being recognized as a living wage, we're always going to fall short of the mark, that people are always going to be faced with, Do I put food on the table or do I pay my rent? which is a scenario I think we need to collectively work to eliminate.

SUZY HANSEN: Is there anything that you would like to see in this upcoming budget, specifically in regard to changing the way that we've been doing things in the past?

NICK JENNERY: I may be politically naïve here, but I would say that if the Province, our political leadership, recognize the severity of the food insecurity crisis that we're in, that it's all headed in the wrong direction, that we're headed to a cliff, that the front-line organizations, which we are depending on to provide that access to food, are perilously close to burning out, and certainly some of those have reached capacity, I would like to see a) some recognition, and b) a commitment that collectively we're going to do something about this as a province. I don't think you have to have the solution, but I think you do need to have the leadership to say, This is what we're going to do and this is why it's a priority.

I think there is some low-hanging fruit to be had. If I look at the cost of prescription drugs, there are programs that help people in low-income brackets, which my colleagues to my right can talk about better than I can, but let's eliminate the co-payment. How big an issue, how big an impact would that be on the government's budget? I come across time and time again where people say, Do I buy food, or do I get my prescription drugs? I think Public Health can speak to the high percentage of people who don't fill their prescriptions for, frankly, reasons that are economic in nature.

SUZY HANSEN: I'm going to ask one more question and then I'll pass it over to my colleague. This is both for Feed Nova Scotia and for DCS. What impact did last year's \$1,000 Heating Assistance Rebate Program rebate have on your clients, and what impact will this year's \$400 reduction have on people's ability to pay for basic necessities like food, energy, and shelter when people were counting on the same rebate again this year?

THE CHAIR: Mr. Jennery? Who was that to?

SUZY HANSEN: It was for both.

NICK JENNERY: With all due respect, I would say this is a classic example of us as a province focusing on outputs as opposed to outcomes. I hear about these well-intentioned programs. I see it. They are warmly received, because frankly any help is warmly received, but the outcome is that the number of people who are food-insecure continues to go up, double digits, each and every month. That is what we have to focus on. That is what we need to ask ourselves collectively: How do we reverse that?

MELISSA MACKINNON: I would agree with that response. We know there's an impact. Our clients specifically are doing the most with every dollar that they have. In response to those measures, we have our measures we take, which are increasing diversion funding, more outreach workers. There's a cause and effect there, and I think generally if we are talking about the outcomes we're looking for, we'll be better off.

We are having more of those conversations, I will say. I think there's better coordination across departments as folks with experience in other areas of government have moved into leadership positions. This seems like a bureaucratic point for some, but to

have an executive deputy minister structure, for example, where we have a smaller number of deputy ministers overseeing and helping to look at the systemic issues, it is helpful. We are seeing that impact.

THE CHAIR: MLA Lachance.

LISA LACHANCE: I will just follow on my colleague's question around impact. We were here yesterday with the Public Accounts Committee talking about the Heating Assistance Rebate Program. Service Nova Scotia fulfills their mandate based on outputs in terms of applications in, applications processed, money out the door for the HARP in particular. The deputy minister couldn't answer the questions: Who is actually measuring the impact of this program? Who is actually looking at the results of this program or others? You talked in your opening remarks about your mandate around increased resilience and self-reliance. How are you measuring that? Beyond outputs, how are you measuring any movement toward your goals?

MELISA MACKINNON: Maybe I could begin and then I'll ask Ms. Knight to talk specifically about a couple of programs. We certainly build evaluation and metrics into each of our programs. For some it's more evident than others. It's the number of people housed, it's the number people attached to work, but there are also more complicated metrics than that. Through our family resource centres, our programming is uptake. In foster care, the number of children kept with families. We have metrics associated with each of our programs.

I think specifically around the food piece, there are distribution metrics, but to our earlier conversation, there's a need and I think it would be a welcome conversation around collective goals. Just recently in the additional \$5 million that we were allocated around food security, I wanted to be sure to cross-reference that with the Department of Communities, Culture, Tourism and Heritage, for example. They have food funding that goes out to community groups.

We also provide metrics on a monthly basis through the Office of Priorities and Planning that tracks every mandate item that's reported on. I'll ask Ms. Knight to get into some specifics around a couple of programs.

JOY KNIGHT: It is a criteria requirement for us to have an evaluation framework around all of the programs and services that we deliver. That's because we need to get at: Is the program working? Do we need to pivot? We want to be flexible, iterative in what we do. We always want to be, as I mentioned before, first-voice informed. That ongoing engagement means that we may need to change or adjust what we do and the services we offer. Evaluation is key and measurement is very important to us.

[10:45 a.m.]

Getting to the point of your question around resilience and well-being is far more complicated, but ultimately that is what we do need to understand. There's some work under way to help us get in that direction, but I would have to be honest and say we're not fully there yet. Some quick highlights around some measures would be really understanding how we work collectively and holistically is also very important to us. Within The Bridge - I think people may be aware of that initiative the government is funding with the former DoubleTree Hotel in Dartmouth - we recently had 13 individuals within a three-week time frame move into permanent housing. Thirteen people sounds small, but in a housing crisis it's quite significant, out of one intervention.

What was important to measure and understand out of that is that was because we had a health clinic on site, so there were health services, there's a mental health and addictions counsellor who works with clients, there's an occupational therapist who does the assessments of their apartments before they move, which was to eliminate the six-month wait-list so they could move quickly.

LISA LACHANCE: I appreciate that and thank you for sharing that. As you know, we have limited time. A couple of rapid response questions. For the Deputy Minister: Is the department working on a poverty reduction strategy or leading on that for the whole government?

MELISSA MACKINNON: That work would be coordinated through those executive deputy ministers and the Office of Priorities and Planning. We play a very key role in that, obviously. Yes, some of the pieces that would fall under us would be relatively recent announcements, so the commitment to the Nova Scotia Child Benefit, the Employment Support and Income Assistance program, expanding the GEO Nova Scotia: Getting Everyone Online program. Those are pieces of the poverty piece, as well as the PATH program are all legs related to poverty reduction.

LISA LACHANCE: Just to clarify, is the government currently developing a poverty reduction strategy?

MELISSA MACKINNON: Yes. The overall strategy, it's connected across departments. We're a piece of that.

LISA LACHANCE: My colleague from the Liberal Party also asked about discussions around raising income assistance rates and the advocacy that you would lead on behalf of your department. I want to go backward in time before I go forward in time. The \$300 increase to folks who identify as living with a disability, how was that determined? In fact, was that part of an overall package where you recommended an overall increase to everyone receiving ESIA? How was \$300 determined to be the number?

MELISA MACKINNON: That would have been recommended before my time as deputy minister, but it would have been a part of the package associated with the overall commitment to the remedy and people with disabilities. In terms of how that will be determined, there are no additional steps, essentially, that people need to take. We have information in the system, and those who have a chronic disability and who can't work because of a disability will automatically get the increase.

LISA LACHANCE: I wanted to ask Mr. Jennery, a bit about - you talked about the one-off approach to managing poverty in the province right now, food security being one piece of that and one result of that patchwork approach. I would like to invite you to speak a bit more to that impact on different service users in terms of - I know the former minister for the Department of Community Services described it as a collage at one point or a quilt. I really take exception to that, because one of the things they did was even read a food calendar for Dartmouth out in the Legislature at one point last session or the previous budget session. Basically, it's nearly impossible to access food off the food calendar and really do anything else. It was basically impossible, looking at that food calendar, to have a child access a hot meal aside from some monthly meals and that sort of thing, because a lot of them were happening at lunch time. I take exception to the impact of these one-offs, and I'm just wondering what you think the impact is on service users.

THE CHAIR: Deputy minister - oh, sorry. Mr. Jennery.

NICK JENNERY: Maybe we should do a job share or a job exchange here or something. (Laughter)

Two things come to my mind when you talk about and I talk about the impact of well-intentioned one-off supports. First off, that any benefit quickly erodes with inflation or the cost of food, and we've all seen the impact of that. The second thing is it doesn't provide the hope that I think is desperately needed. Hope, not only for those who are food-insecure, but hope for those frontline organizations and charities and food banks and family resource centres that are really shouldering the response to the crisis that we're in.

To sound like a broken record, I think that if we had a goal within which this is what we're going to do and hold ourselves accountable for during this fiscal year, and this is what we're going to do the next fiscal year, people could see those one-offs as potentially an advancement toward a goal. If we saw that, an advancement toward that goal, that creates hope. I live in that world every single day. I have a trauma counsellor on site to deal with people who are dealing with other people who are losing hope. That may sound a bit of a soft response, but it's a very real one. That would be my response.

LISA LACHANCE: I appreciate that, and I do think the reliance on communities and volunteers to respond to an ever-increasing crisis, while on one hand, obviously we're all grateful to everyone who pitches in, and it's the great Nova Scotian spirit of helping

others, I would agree that - I'm glad that in your case, the organization's able to support your staff. There are lots of volunteers who are also facing ever-expanding needs.

I spoke to some people involved with the food pantry here in Halifax, and it is heartbreaking work. That has a long-term impact on people, and often people who are on the edge, or - I don't know if this is quite the expression I want to use - least able to give are the folks who are, like, Oh, right, even though it's hard for me this week at the grocery store, I'm going to make sure that I also drop some things in the box or take some things to the pantry. I know we're not measuring lists at this point, this sort of impact overall, but I think it is having an impact on not just folks who are food insecure or service users, but the community supporting them and the organizations supporting them. I don't think that's a soft point; I think that's a real point, and it's having a real impact in our communities.

I'm going to start asking a question, but we might have to come back to it depending on time.

THE CHAIR: Order. We will now move to the PC caucus and begin with MLA White.

JOHN WHITE: We talked a lot about - you touched on a couple of departments outside of the Department of Community Services that are helping to reach food insecurity. You mentioned The Bridge. You mentioned the collaborative food network earlier. I want to go back and give you a chance to give us a little more understanding as to whether the departments - I realize that's outside of your job description, but I do know you're working in partnership with them. I wonder if you could tell us a little more about what might be happening in other government departments that impact food security - go back to that.

MELISSA MACKINNON: I think in terms of food security - if you look at the Department of Communities, Culture, Tourism and Heritage, they would have the Community Food Access and Literacy Fund. That supports some of the community gardens that you would see. It would support programming to come in and help people learn how to cook, learn about food - those sorts of things. There are smaller grants to community organizations. There have been some great partnerships there, I know, between libraries, school boards, community partners, those sorts of things.

Then they have - I'm going to forget the name of it, but it's a local food program that supports many of the volunteer-driven organizations across the province. In Sydney - I'm trying to recall - I think the pensioners club down there, it's called - they do essentially meals on wheels programming across the province. I believe that's a \$3 million annual program.

Then there are the school food programs. We are augmenting the SchoolsPlus programs. We know they serve a real need for those who need it most, so we are augmenting some of their funding with this recent allocation. This is a priority for the

Department of Agriculture. I know they're looking - maybe Mr. Jennery at some point, if there's time, could shed some light on getting local food into many of our organizations. That's a priority for them. They're working with the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development on food carts as well in school, with local food.

As I said, these programs, I think, can be better coordinated. We at the Department of Community Services, because we're connected to organizations through our programs, don't necessarily have a direct relationship with all of these hundreds of organizations. But what I would say, when I do read a story about a food bank or an organization needing food, we are very happy at Community Services to be a contact for them to help them find it with our partners. We're more than happy to play that role.

JOHN WHITE: I'm going to go off script for a minute. As a director of a charity myself, we work closely with the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development and the Department of Community Services to identify families in need. We've been doing that for 30 years now. It's a great relationship.

I want to touch on that, because I want to say about some things I'm hearing here today. It not only gives hope to the people we deliver to at the door but also gives hope and a sense of community to the entire community. We have hundreds of volunteers who come in to help us to donate food and deliver it. We buy it in bulk, we bag it, and we deliver it. I have many people who have received groceries in past years who help us bag the groceries and deliver it to someone else before taking their own at the end of the day.

I wish we weren't needed. I totally wish we were not needed. I'd absolutely love to see that day. But in the meantime, a sense of community is important. We need to know to stand up for each other. We know to know what others are going through. We need to get outside of our own heads sometimes and in a different space. I think the community events that are out there, the community organizations, offer that opportunity for people to have an entry point into seeing what's going on and to build their value in the community.

I also want to talk a little bit about how poverty is generational. We see that very much in our own hometowns and stuff. We talked about the need for doing things differently. Mr. Jennery's mentioned that.

Can you please tell us about the early intervention and prevention measures that are being implemented through the Department of Community Services?

JOY KNIGHT: You're absolutely right that we have to start thinking preventively if we're going to have the system changes that we all want to see. In particular, we're very interested in our young people within Community Services and how we interrupt that cycle of intergenerational poverty that we see in particular for income assistance-attached families.

[11:00 a.m.]

There have been some significant investments over the last couple of years. In this budget in particular, they've doubled the budget for youth prevention programming and expanded it from not just young people who are attached to income assistance, but young people who are from low-income households, recognizing that the barriers they face in their lives are very similar. Two-thirds of people living in poverty are not attached to income assistance and they face a lot of poverty-related barriers, which would be similar to what income assistance families face.

We are significantly expanding that programming to better support communities, particularly through what's called the Youth Development Initiative. What's important about that program is it's also taking an Afrocentric and Indigenous approach. We have a stream that's led and designed by the African Nova Scotian community for youth as well as the Indigenous community through the Nova Scotia Association of Black Social Workers as well as the Native Council of Nova Scotia. There are a number of investments that have been made.

JOHN WHITE: I'm going to pass to MLA Harrison now. She's answered a couple of my questions.

THE CHAIR: MLA Harrison.

LARRY HARRISON: Just listening to all of the comments, this is huge. This is a huge societal problem. I'm glad to hear about the Santa Claus program that was conducted. I've talked to a number of communities who would love to do things but don't know quite where to start or how to get at it. The government has a huge role to play, there's absolutely no question about that, but so does corporate and communities as a whole, just to have that kind of wholeness. I would love to see every one of them get together and sort this out, because it's going to take all of us to do that. It's not just going to be government, it's not going to be this or that, it's going to be a holistic thing for all of us.

About children, for instance: What are the criteria for the Nova Scotia Child Benefit? Who can answer that?

JOY KNIGHT: The Nova Scotia Child Benefit has two income thresholds. If you're under \$26,000 per year or under \$34,000, you receive different amounts. I can provide those amounts if you'd like, but there was a recent significant investment to expand again the Nova Scotia Child Benefit this year as there was last year. That has increased to \$127 per month per child for families under the \$26,000 per year threshold. If you have three children or more, that is an additional \$381 a month in the pockets of low-income families. It is having a significant impact.

We always know we need to do more, but the numbers of people who are being supported through that program are growing, so it is helping more people, and we know it's having a significant impact.

LARRY HARRISON: Going back to the disability funding that's been announced, how many people will be affected by that?

JOY KNIGHT: Our analysis has shown that we believe about 64 per cent of the caseload is a person with a disability who may qualify for the new disability supplement. It's quite significant. As has been mentioned by the deputy minister before, our intention is to make that the least onerous as possible on the clients. We have medical documentation on file already. That is what we used to make this assessment and determination of that 64 per cent.

We'll be looking to make it as simple as possible for people to qualify, but also recognizing that just because you have a disability doesn't mean that you should not be engaged in other services that we have in the department. We will actively continue to support our disability supplement clients or those in the new disability stream when it comes online with access to employment, with access to services and supports so they can continue to improve their own adequacy where it is appropriate. There is no reason at all that we would exclude people with disabilities from access to those supports and services.

LARRY HARRISON: Are there other programs that really help folks on disability? I know there's this, but are there others in place now that would really help?

JOY KNIGHT: Is the question specific to employment or general?

LARRY HARRISON: Just generally speaking.

JOY KNIGHT: Within Employment Support and Income Assistance in particular, we have a number of employment-related programs that are specifically targeted to support individuals with disabilities or barriers to employment. We have our Work Activity Program, which supports predominantly persons with disabilities. There are six centres across the province that deliver that.

We recognize in all of our programming, not just that that works with persons with disabilities, that the journey is different for everybody. You may need six months to attach to work, or you may need two years. Regardless of what that journey looks like for you, our interventions need to respond appropriately, so along that pathway for you there would be accessible devices assessment of what you might need in your workplace that we could fund to help you be successful from that accessibility perspective. We absolutely look at accessibility when we talk about our supportive-housing mandate, and all of our units that we build are accessible to all Nova Scotians. In the forefront of our mind is how we make

sure that we're meeting the whole needs of a person, and if you have a disability, we need to be able to respond appropriately to that.

LARRY HARRISON: I'm going to hand it over to my colleague.

THE CHAIR: MLA Barkhouse.

DANIELLE BARKHOUSE: Mr. Jennery, Feed Nova Scotia's work, especially with the meal program, is critical during this time of need. I'm wondering if you could please provide the committee with an overview of your meal program, and maybe highlight some of your main objectives and partnerships in regard to what Feed Nova Scotia does, and the meal program.

NICK JENNERY: I'm not sure what you're referring to in terms of our meal program. (Interruption) For a meal program, we do provide meals as part of our Christmas holiday effort - hundreds of them. It's 7,100 households that we support. But on a day-to-day basis, what we do is provide food to the food banks, shelters, and meal programs around the province, not specifically meals.

DANIELLE BARKHOUSE: That's what I was speaking about - your Christmas program. Seventy-one hundred homes, or around?

NICK JENNERY: Just let me be pithy about this. Our Christmas or holiday program is a three-month effort, something that we do in conjunction with 48 other organizations. Twenty-six of them are member agencies, 22 are other community agencies, such as the Lions Club, Rotary Club, that type of thing.

With the Department of Community Services and those 48 organizations, we manage a central registry for support. What we ask people who are looking for that support is: Would they want a Christmas hamper? Do they have any dietary restrictions? We offer a vegan version. And if you don't want a Christmas hamper, would you prefer a cooked meal?

We try to give as much choice as we can to the people in need. In the last couple of years, where you've got a significant number of people unhoused and living in tents, there's no point in delivering a 25-pound frozen turkey to a tent. What we do is we give gift cards, and we work that with outreach organizations.

It's a half-million-dollar initiative that we do, but as a point that Joy Knight made, I think all of us, what we're trying to do is give people choice. If you want a meal, we'll do the best we can to give you a meal. We're not, frankly, set up with that. We work with organizations like MetroWorks, which is a member agency. They have the commercial kitchens to be able to develop that meal, and we'll provide them with the food to get it done.

DANIELLE BARKHOUSE: I just wanted to make sure that was put on record, because I think it's a great program, what you do, and how you roll with the punches, if you will, in regard to cooked or vegan or whatnot.

I think Deputy Minister MacKinnon stated earlier, if I'm not mistaken, about local food. I'm wondering if you could carry that through, because that got cut off a little bit. Both of you.

NICK JENNERY: In 2022, our procurement budget - that is the dollars that we put in place to augment the food donations we get from farmers, retailers, community efforts of one sort or another - was \$1 million. We doubled that last year to \$2 million, and we're probably looking at - I don't know where we'd even find the money for it, but we're going to have to do better than \$2 million. We use this as an opportunity to buy the foods that are most in need. It's no surprise that the most-valued foods are fresh fruits and vegetables and perishable products.

We go to our farmers, and the farmers are nothing short of amazing in this province. Month in, month out, they're always there for us and for Nova Scotians despite the difficulties. What we said to them: We don't want you to stop your donations, because we really need them, but what we'd like to do is to buy the surplus food as well. That has allowed us to buy - it's an imperfect metric, but for instance, vegetables at somewhere around 91 cents a kilogram. You're not going to get that in a retail grocery store.

We get a really good deal, we buy locally, and more than half of our procurement budget goes to buying locally. We will continue to do that as much as we can, frankly because the local goods are what's most wanted. It's high-quality - I would challenge anybody to come into our cooler at any time, and I would put the product that you find there against any retail store any day of the week because it comes directly to us. We like that arrangement. We'll do more of it, and it may be an example of a collaboration where Nova Scotians are helping Nova Scotians.

MELISSA MACKINNON: Just to say this could be a really exciting area of collaboration where we can - we know this is top of mind for the Department of Agriculture and the farmers and local food producers that they support and ties in with their mandate item. This is definitely one piece of our work that I think we can advance in the weeks to come.

DANIELLE BARKHOUSE: Ms. Knight, you were talking about wraparound services earlier but due to time were cut off. I would like you to maybe talk about that some more. I get phone calls all the time asking what wraparound services are. What are the supports? Can you give us some examples of locations and stuff like that?

JOY KNIGHT: Wraparound services are the critical, most integral part, particularly of our supportive housing approach. We are committed to meeting people

where they are, and in order to do that, you have to bring the supports and services to where people are. That might mean physically or that might mean the mental space that they're in at that time, but we need to connect at a level where people are and then bring to bear what supports and services they need to be successful.

The wraparound is dependent, of course, on the individual needs that person is experiencing at that time. It requires the partnership of all government partners in order to do it successfully. I don't want to repeat myself on the previous example I was talking about with The Bridge, but that is actually a great example of wraparound services. You have health, mental health onsite, you have housing support workers, we have Adsum for Women and Children and Welcome Housing & Support Services all onsite providing daily services to help people move forward in their lives.

[11:15 a.m.]

Those services then extend once you exit The Bridge program. You're still attached. They have made the efforts and the connections for you in community so that you're not just let go. They really help you be integrated into the community where you're moving to. That is what is really in many ways the secret to success for helping people. It's no different, even when I think about our youth programming and employment programming. If you don't have the wraparound services, which includes food, it's hard to participate. It's hard to show up to a training program every day when your belly is empty and you're worried about how you're going to manage some of the other complications in your life, so we provide mental health services through our employment programming. We provide access to child care, we do food security, and all of those pieces are critical to help people really move forward and focus on their own well-being and independence.

THE CHAIR: Perfect timing. Order. We will now move into the second round of questioning, which I've allocated seven minutes per caucus, and we'll move over to MLA Kerr.

CARMAN KERR: I struggle sometimes to stay on script, so I'll go a bit off-script. To your comments on procurement of local food from farmers and how critical that is, I grew up on a farm. I'm the agriculture critic for our party, just named recently. I obviously do work with families and farms connected to schools. One challenge I've raised to the minister on a couple of occasions is our local volunteer groups that are trying to source local food in our area aren't able to do so. They're told because of current contracts and procurement that food will come in the non-traditional way, or being trucked in.

What I see on the ground - I'm happy to hear that the ministers of other departments are looking at it. It has been a couple of years of looking at it, and I'm curious about action. Maybe from all three witnesses, any detail you can provide that I can take back to Annapolis or across the province that this is changing, that local food is being sourced and it is being used more often in schools than I may realize.

MELISSA MACKINNON: Where I'm relatively new to this portfolio, I've really had only one broader conversation to understand where Agriculture is moving with this. What I'd commit to is bringing even a staff member from Agriculture with a staff member from Community Services to have a conversation to see where the barriers might be. If it's also a larger issue, I'm happy to bring it forward to the Office of Regulatory Affairs and Service Effectiveness or Service Nova Scotia on the procurement side of things to see what the issue is there.

CARMAN KERR: I'll switch gears. Mr. Jennery, you mentioned statistics, or gathering info, or specifics on those who visit our food banks. I have a long list of seniors in my office in Annapolis who are struggling from a 7 per cent power increase, to grocery prices, to rent prices, and a long list of things other than that. Do you collect data on seniors or specific groups - students as well - and if so, could you maybe comment on an increase you see in those groups visiting our food banks?

NICK JENNERY: We collect limited demographic data. It is a voluntary thing for a client to offer up, so we're obviously highly respectful of that. I will say that not only with existing clients, but with the new clients - in December, we saw 2,400 new people, first-time clients, looking for support from food banks. They cover all demographics: small and large families, young and old adults. There's no one particular group, although Black and Indigenous households are three times more likely to be food insecure. We do see that as well, but I don't have any specific demographics for you.

CARMAN KERR: I guess I'll ask the same question to the Department of Community Services, to the deputy minister and Ms. Knight. Would the department have any specifics on our senior population and food insecurity numbers, or with students on the same question?

MELISSA MACKINNON: We'll take that away to see what demographics we might have. Support for seniors is something that - obviously, there's the Department of Seniors and Long-term Care working on programming, but in the area of food security, I know that's one of the audiences that Communities, Culture, Tourism and Heritage works with the Department of Seniors and Long-term Care on. As you know, there are many seniors volunteer groups in that space, and they might have some data as well.

CARMAN KERR: I guess to Feed Nova Scotia, or Mr. Jennery, community members play a huge role in delivering on food insecurity issues in Annapolis and across the province. Could you talk more about the coordination that happens? I think you touched on it, but - the coordination between Feed Nova Scotia and community-led initiatives in Annapolis and across the province?

NICK JENNERY: One of the lessons that I've personally learned in recent years is that whatever you do, make sure you co-design it with the community. You may think you

know what communities need, and you may think you know what people who are food insecure need, but chances are, you got it wrong.

We have a first-voice advisory council now put in place. We pay them a living wage to be involved in the brainstorming, design, and evaluation of all the programs that we do. That's been invaluable. A case in point would be Eskasoni. During the early years of COVID-19, we thought - collectively, we thought it was a good idea that all you had to do was dial 211 and Feed Nova Scotia will get one or two boxes of non-perishable products to you within two business days. Three numbers, that's all you have to dial. Sounds like the right thing to do. It was a disrespectful thing to do. There are cultural barriers. My personal learning was, go into the community, have the conversations, co-design something that's right for them.

Another example came up with the Prestons. Learning from that, we go into Preston, and what they most wanted - the family resource centre there - was: if you could give us some food. So we gave them \$25,000 of food for a pilot, and we are going to launch a culinary design program in conjunction with home delivery. That family resource centre had all the volunteers lined up to do exactly all of that. We simply provided the food and watched how it evolved from there, and supported where we could.

Another really good example of co-designed solutions . . .

THE CHAIR: Order. My apologies. The time for the Liberal caucus has ended.

We'll move back to the NDP caucus and MLA Hansen.

SUZY HANSEN: I do want to hear the rest of that. If you want to finish your co-design discussion, you can do that as well.

NICK JENNERY: We're tackling this problem from our perspective in providing the immediate needs. People are hungry today. They need to put food on the table tonight. We are supporting the food banks and the shelters and the meal programs and the drop-in centres. We're trying to expand our network as much as we can. We are supporting, financially and otherwise, organizations that want to develop wraparound services - make sure that legal aid is available; that if you want your taxes done by a food bank, you can do that; if you need some parenting training or postnatal classes - all of these types of things.

To understand what the frontline community organizations want to do and the need that they see, support that as best you can. Sometimes it's food. Sometimes it's programs. Sometimes it's a pilot - let's just try something and learn from that. Sometimes it's money.

We have an Innovation and Learning Lab that we established a couple of years ago. We put \$2 million against this initiative. That's more money than we've ever done in any

one program, because we know that the current approach to dealing with food insecurity is not working. You only have to look at the graphs.

So what we should we try? We're trying a rural bulk-buy program to provide access to food. We've got a pilot just in the design stage right now - a social supermarket. We are looking for a community where they have both the commitment and the resources to actually do it. We don't want to go in there and say that this is Feed Nova Scotia's social supermarket. We do want to make sure that you have the elements there to actually make it happen.

There's a lot of that innovative work going on. I think somebody who's not at the table here are the libraries. The library is one of the last safe places for somebody who's food insecure. It's the living room of the unhoused, and they're doing phenomenal work. Look at the community fridges.

Lots of innovations. I think we need to scale up the best ideas, and to the deputy minister's point, do it in a collaborative way, hopefully underneath a provincial goal.

SUZY HANSEN: My question is to the department. Feed Nova Scotia has identified over one-third - we talked about this through our conversations today - one-third of their total clients being income assistance recipients. We want to know: Does your department track how many of your clients rely on the services of food banks?

JOY KNIGHT: No, unfortunately that's not something we're able to track. We would have a sense, though, of food insecurity through our service provider partners whom we regularly do consult with and engage with. Within ESIA specifically, of course, there's our employment-related programming, our homelessness-related programming, but I also work really closely with our colleagues at child and family well-being, around family resource centres and their needs, to try to work across the government to have a better understanding of how our client needs are not being met.

Of course, we also hear from our caseworkers, who are obviously very critical service delivery experts on the ground in their communities, and who often know best. We do have ongoing engagement with them to help better understand.

SUZY HANSEN: I think those are all key pieces: having people on the ground, service providers, volunteers, community groups. Helping to help others is key, which also gives us data to know that there are X number of people who are in need. I think that's really good knowledge to have and be tapped into, so that we can do the best work we can here around the table where we can make these decisions.

What I'm hearing is that the numbers are growing. If the numbers of people who are accessing food banks are growing, or who are in need, or who are living in poverty, then as to your point, we need to look at it differently, and we need to do things differently.

I think a lot of the services and programs are absolutely necessary, but where does it go to where we don't utilize those services enough because people are actually being taken care of, or are taking care of themselves in ways that don't actually take from the volunteership - where they can enjoy being a volunteer and not be overburdened sometimes with the trauma that we see in community with poverty and lack of food, and with the cost of living and inflation, and all of these things that come along with that?

When do we get to that point? This is why I want to ask a question - we mentioned our neighbours, the unhoused, those folks who are out living rough right now. I want to know from the department: Can you explain why the income assistance rate for someone living in a tent or in a shelter is set significantly lower than the standard rate? Is this a policy that you're considering changing that we will be seeing in this upcoming budget?

JOY KNIGHT: There are a number of initiatives that we are investing in, and have invested in, to bring supports and services to bear for individuals who are unfortunately sleeping outside. In conversations with our service provider partners, who I have to be really clear that they are our partners - they are not funded agencies of government - and if we don't link arms with our homelessness sector, we will not achieve what we are trying to achieve. We very much respect and honour the expertise they bring forward, and recognize that they are best positioned to provide the supports to people who are experiencing homelessness, and in particular those who are sleeping outside.

We've made some investments in a new coordinated outreach team for HRM to specifically provide more holistic services to individuals who need them, which would include improving their food insecurity, improving access to services, better meeting their basic needs, as well as having some really great conversations with the Office of Addictions and Mental Health, which we know is actually the largest gap in serving the population that is sleeping outside. We're working on some new investments in that space that is going to directly move into encampments.

THE CHAIR: That's right on time. That completes the NDP time. I believe we're on to MLA Taggart.

TOM TAGGART: My questions are going to be to Mr. Jennery, but I really need to say something here. I've sat here actually making a lot of notes and stuff. Typically, I come to these committee meetings with a mindset that the other side is going to try to find ways to be whatever - point out flaws they see maybe in government, and I'm going to sit here and defend it. I have not many meetings that I've felt as good about with respect to collaboration here and what I've seen today.

I'll get to the question in a minute. I'm really particularly interested in - I'm sorry, I've got so many - the pilot projects you're doing with the community food network or whatever, and this whole idea and collaboration. It just starts my mind working about how I can actually do that in Colchester North. In Colchester North, we're a really rural

constituency - don't have any towns. I just want to say that I'm really happy with what I've seen here, and I'm going to lead to that in one of my questions, if you don't mind, Mr. Jennery.

[11:30 a.m.]

Last month, the government provided extra funding for food to help Nova Scotians who were facing rising food costs. How does Feed Nova Scotia determine which communities and food banks receive additional support, and how much do they receive from this investment? If you don't mind, Mr. Jennery, I am passionate about rural communities and the idea that we don't really ever - we oftentimes fall through the cracks, especially where we don't have a town or anything like that. Now, we have the Town of Truro, but we're quite rural. Could you respond to that for me a little bit, please?

NICK JENNERY: If you're a food bank and part of the Feed Nova Scotia network, we give you a program called Link2Feed. We give you the software, we'll give you the computer if you need it, we'll pay for your bandwidth, whatever it takes. It's for a very specific reason: to make the onboarding of clients and support for them as easy as possible, but importantly, to give us - a food distribution operation - the information that we need. If you're a food bank that has a lot of young families, or maybe a disproportionate number of elderly people, or perhaps has a lot of new immigrants, that's important information for us to know.

We're not a full-line supermarket. If you come into Feed Nova Scotia's warehouse - and I would invite any of you at any time to do that - we'd have a lot of variety, but we're not a full-line supermarket. As we buy more foods, we're extending all of that. Why do I say that? That information allows us, as much as we can, to deliver the types of food that you need in the quantities that we can manage. It's called a food share program. For instance - in simplistic terms - if you have 3 per cent of Nova Scotia's food insecurity problem in your constituency, then we will give you, as a guide, 3 per cent of everything that we have in a way that's co-designed that meets your specific needs. That's how we get that done. The more that we have, the more that 3 per cent grows. It's a dynamic, but that's how we get to the graphs that were circulated to you.

TOM TAGGART: I guess I want to say that in preparation for this meeting, MLA White actually sent me a list of the places that you send food to. One of them was the Tatamagouche food bank, so I checked. I called the guy there, a friend of mine, and he was absolutely very happy. I had in my mind that you didn't go off the main road. Clearly, you do. In a lot of rural communities, in mine alone, I can think of three of what we call community kitchens - although one is a registered not-for-profit - but are not part of the whole Feed Nova Scotia food bank system.

I made a bunch of notes. I'm looking forward to contacting you or somebody else. I'm actually hoping that I can touch base with you just for a couple of minutes afterwards.

I found my next question here. (Laughs) Sorry. You've answered a lot of this, and I would appreciate it if - the role that private sector, as it relates to food security and the good collaboration. I know you've talked about that, but it's important to me to hear it, in particular with agriculture. I know MLA Kerr and I are both pretty passionate about agriculture, and the role that they play and can play here. Could you give us a little bit more information on that maybe?

NICK JENNERY: I'll be pithy. I would just say that there are more organizations that would like to be part of our network, and there are two real hurdles to deal with there. One is, frankly, our own capacity to deliver food to more organizations beyond the 260,000 kilograms we did in a short month called December. The other thing I would say is that those organizations - we have a requirement that they meet certain standards around governance, around food safety, signatory to the ethical food banking codes so there's no discrimination such as students, or immigrants, or any of those types of things.

In terms of the partnerships that we have, we have both corporate and individual donors. I really like working with the businesses because, one, they understand their community as well as anybody. They know how to get stuff done. They know the importance of setting a goal, and they're not frightened about innovation and taking risks. All of those attributes work really well for me.

THE CHAIR: MLA Taggart, you have seven seconds.

TOM TAGGART: When I referred to agriculture, I'm talking about people who would have food security, you know what I mean? Like large barns and that sort. We'll talk about it.

THE CHAIR: Order. The time for questioning has completed. I would welcome Mr. Jennery - if you have some closing remarks that you'd like to leave with the committee.

NICK JENNERY: I would sincerely like to thank all of you for the concern and interest that you clearly have, not only here but in your own communities. I see it outside of this room, and I want to thank you for it. It's inspiring for me to be here and to feel that. It sounds like a strange remark, but I really do appreciate your questions, and I appreciate your concerns. I appreciate your curiosity because through curiosity, we'll find those elements where we can collaborate better. If there's a willingness to try, if there's a willingness to take some risk - because we know the status quo is unsustainable - you have a very willing partner here with Feed Nova Scotia.

I've underscored the importance of having a goal under which all of those innovations can, I think, come together: the importance of measuring our progress in terms of those outcomes and the respectful need to co-design any solutions and approaches with the communities involved. I am hopeful. I'm desperate, but I'm hopeful. This is why we do

what we do because people like you and our donors show their support day in and day out, and it puts gas in our tank to do what we do.

The farmers - just as a last note - I would say there's no better example than the farmers in our province. They find ways. We had a Christmas program: 7,100 households. They found a way to give us pretty much a hundred bins of produce for that program. They found a way. They just did it, and it's amazing to me that they did. There are more opportunities, so I would say, Let's get it done.

THE CHAIR: Thank you, Mr. Jennery. I will now welcome Deputy Minister MacKinnon for her closing remarks.

MELISSA MACKINNON: I won't really try to follow that, other than to thank Mr. Jennery for your leadership in our province. It's an opportunity every time I come here to learn from the colleagues at the table, and to take your questions.

I would just put out the offer around any of those local issues that you're dealing with with your constituents, where you might need to understand government services across any department a little bit better, you can feel free to reach out to Ms. Knight or me and our teams. We're happy to collaborate on those pieces. We look forward, Mr. Jennery, to working with you in the near future.

THE CHAIR: Thank you very much for appearing here today. It's a very important topic. I appreciate all of your time.

We don't have, I don't think, any committee business on the agenda. You're welcome to collect your things and leave. We'll move into - if there was anything the committee wanted to talk about.

Do you want to have a five-minute recess? We'll take a five-minute recess, then.

[11:40 a.m. The committee recessed.]

[11:45 a.m. The committee reconvened.]

THE CHAIR: Order. I call the meeting of the Standing Committee on Community Services back to order.

For committee business, there's nothing listed on the agenda. We will move on to our next meeting, which is going to be February 6, 2024. The topic is Support for Community Centres, Infrastructures, and Facilities. The witness will be the Department of Communities, Culture, Tourism and Heritage. This meeting is adjourned.

[The committee adjourned at 11:46 a.m.]