

HANSARD

NOVA SCOTIA HOUSE OF ASSEMBLY

STANDING COMMITTEE

ON

COMMUNITY SERVICES

Tuesday, May 7, 2024

Committee Room

Provincial Emergency Response System

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COMMUNITY SERVICES COMMITTEE

Melissa Sheehy-Richard (Chair)

John White (Vice Chair)

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Suzy Hansen

[Melissa Sheehy-Richard was replaced by John A. MacDonald.]

[Hon. Derek Mombourquette was replaced by Hon. Ben Jessome.]

[Kendra Coombes was replaced by Gary Burrill.]

In Attendance:

Gordon Hebb
Chief Legislative Counsel

Tamer Nusseibeh
Legislative Committee Clerk

WITNESSES

Department of Municipal Affairs and Housing

Paul Mason, Executive Director, Emergency Management Office

Fire Service Association of Nova Scotia

Wade Jennings, Former Vice-President

Rod Nielsen, Past President

Terry Canning, 1st Vice-President

Royal Canadian Mounted Police

Staff Sergeant Robert Frizzell, Non-Commissioned Officer i/c of CROPS Support

Glen Byrne, i/c of Operational Support and Communication Centre



HALIFAX, TUESDAY, MAY 7, 2024

STANDING COMMITTEE ON COMMUNITY SERVICES

10:00 A.M.

CHAIR
Melissa Sheehy-Richard

VICE CHAIR
John White

THE CHAIR: Order. I call this meeting to order. This is the Standing Committee on Community Services. I'm John White, the MLA for Glace Bay-Dominion and the Vice Chair of this committee.

Today we will hear from presenters regarding the Provincial Emergency Response System. I ask you to please turn off your phones or silence them, and put them aside for us. In case of emergency, we'll use the Granville Street exit and go up to the Grand Parade.

I will now ask committee members to introduce themselves, beginning with MLA MacDonald on my left.

[The committee members introduced themselves.]

THE CHAIR: I'd also like to recognize the presence of Chief Legislative Counsel Gordon Hebb on my left, and Legislative Committee Clerk Tamer Nusseibeh on my right.

I'll go to the table of witnesses. I'll begin with Mr. Mason, and ask for just introductions first. Then we'll come back for opening remarks.

[The witnesses introduced themselves.]

THE CHAIR: Starting at the left, I believe, Mr. Mason, you have opening remarks.

PAUL MASON: Thank you for the invitation to appear today to discuss the Provincial Emergency Response System. Let me begin my short opening remarks by describing what the Nova Scotia Emergency Management Office does, our role before, during, and after emergencies. I want to express my appreciation for the other guests who are among EMO's valued municipal and first response partners.

To be clear, EMO is not a first responder. We are a coordinating body that brings together federal, provincial, municipal, First Nations, critical infrastructure, and NGO partners to help Nova Scotians plan, prepare for, respond to, and recover from emergencies. EMO contributes to the provincial emergency response system in many ways. I'll highlight three this morning.

Firstly, we operate the provincial 911 system, and ensure that the systems and equipment are operational to receive and transfer calls for those requesting assistance. We work closely with four public safety answering points that answer 911 calls from across the province.

Secondly, EMO coordinates the National Public Alerting System in Nova Scotia. Our staff issue alerts at the request of organizations responding to emergencies, such as police in municipalities. We have also worked with the RCMP and HRP so that they are able to issue policing-related alerts directly within their jurisdiction. We also provide quarterly training to all partner agencies that can request or issue an alert, in order to support their operational readiness.

Thirdly, the Incident Management Division at EMO engages our many partners through providing training, conducting exercises, supporting municipal emergency management planning, and activating the Provincial Coordination Centre, or PCC . . .

THE CHAIR: Order. Sorry, Mr. Mason. Can I ask you to move closer to the microphone so Legislative TV can pick you up better? We can hear you, but Legislative TV's having trouble.

PAUL MASON: Sure.

. . . activating the Provincial Coordination Centre to receive an action request for assistance during emergency responses.

Through these efforts, EMO does its part to help communities become as resilient as possible to disasters. Everyone has to do their part, from the individual to the community to the Province to the federal government and to our many partners at each level.

The events of the past five years have made it abundantly clear that Nova Scotia can expect more frequent and intense natural hazards caused by climate change. In the past, the Provincial Coordination Centre might activate once or twice a year. In 2023 alone, the PCC

activated for nine events spanning 41 days. The Province realizes that the model that has served Nova Scotians for decades needs to change to reflect this changing risk environment. That is why last month, legislation was tabled to create a new department of emergency management and Nova Scotia Guard. This was the first step, and consultations are taking place with key partners to hear their feedback and ideas. Once these important discussions are complete, the next steps will happen this Fall with the launch of the department.

With every great challenge comes great opportunities. I'm excited to be part of the work to build a strong and effective department of emergency management, and work with many partners to better plan, prepare, respond to, and recover from emergencies here in Nova Scotia.

THE CHAIR: Mr. Nielsen.

ROD NIELSEN: I would also like to thank the members of the committee for your time today and the opportunity for us to be here with you.

With the fire service of Nova Scotia being a primary first responder to a multitude of emergency types, the topic of our provincial emergency response system is certainly a key component to keeping our responders and the public safer. Any tools that the fire service can utilize during an emergency, or the onset of an emergency, can assist in earlier and safer mitigation of the incident.

When the fire service conducts an operational debrief of a major incident, communication issues are usually at the top of the list. There needs to be a collaborative approach with all of our emergency service stakeholders to discuss and provide input on this or any other communication medium used for emergencies. Any system or tool should not negatively affect another emergency agency, either.

Lastly, with the fire service possibly being the first on the incident scene and discovering the magnitude of the incident, the governance of the alerting system and who is authorized to issue an alert is a definite concern of the fire service.

In closing, to the Chair and the committee members, thank you very much for the opportunity for us to speak today. We are looking forward to collaborating on this topic.

THE CHAIR: Mr. Byrne, did you have opening remarks?

GLEN BYRNE: Good morning, everybody. We're very pleased to have been invited to today's committee meeting, and welcome questions about our emergency management unit and alerting in Nova Scotia.

The RCMP issue emergency alerts via the Alert Ready system when there is an ongoing or police-related incident that may put the public in direct harm. Examples of this would be (unintelligible) firearms- or weapons-related calls, an active shooter, immediate active rapid deployment, and/or terrorism events. We also issue AMBER Alerts.

During a significant and critical incident, our officers continuously assess the situation to determine if and when an alert is appropriate.

THE CHAIR: That completes our opening remarks. Now the floor will be open for questioning. I'll remind everybody to wait until I call your name recognizing you and your microphone turns red so Legislative Television can pick you up. I would remind everybody that we're going to do 20-minute round questioning, beginning with the Liberals first and then following with the NDP and then the PC caucus. Following that, we'll figure out how much time we have for a lightning round. We'll end questioning altogether at twenty minutes to 12:00.

We begin with the Liberal caucus. MLA Kerr.

CARMAN KERR: Thanks to everyone for being here. My first questions would be around what's top of mind for me, and that's rescue boats and rescues we're doing on the water. There was an article by CBC this week speaking about this topic: 84 out of 288 fire departments have motorized boats. They cost around \$42,000 up to \$150,000. They're critical equipment.

Last night, we had an incident in my community of Granville Ferry. Four people capsized, and they are - we have, as far as I know, two boats out of the Annapolis Royal department. I don't think we have any other boats in Annapolis County, but I stand corrected if anyone wants to comment on that. My understanding is they're without side-scan sonar, they're without the FLIR system.

I guess my question would be to the fire service first: Could you explain a bit about these? a) Is that true that there are only two boats in Annapolis County as far as you're aware? b) Is it true that it is missing this equipment, and could you explain that equipment a bit more on these water rescues?

ROD NIELSEN: Yes. To answer the first question, I am unsure of how many would be in Annapolis County. I can't definitely answer that one, but we could find out for you.

Secondly, as far as the missing equipment, there is no standard or anything of what needs to be or should be on those particular boats. When it comes to each municipality, they're run differently, and each fire department could be run separately inside that. The focus of most areas, most fire departments is to be able to cover that need with mutual aid

departments, so not every individual fire department would have all that equipment. Hopefully that answers your question.

CARMAN KERR: My understanding is that the only two boats in the county are at Annapolis Royal. It's older equipment, and my understanding is side-scan sonar would be critical to make sure the efforts are successful.

Speaking of response, I know that Annapolis Royal waited hours for other departments. We're certainly thankful for other departments that stepped up and came in, as far as Dayspring, Kings County, et cetera. I guess my question back to fire service and to EMO: Would it be your opinion that more departments, if that's indeed true, should have this equipment on site in future?

ROD NIELSEN: I would totally agree that it would be advantageous for every fire department to have that type of equipment. Again, it's how many calls do you get of that nature? How close are you to water, and is it ocean or is it tributaries - rivers and so on? What is that equipment and the cost of those units, and training, and everything else? It goes deeper than just having the equipment.

CARMAN KERR: Our entire county lies on the Annapolis River - parts of our county lie along the whole stretch of the Bay of Fundy - so we certainly are close to water in all parts of our county. We've had another water rescue just a few months ago, so I would say it's more frequent than we would like, or anyone would like. I grew up with people being lost in the river and on the ocean.

As far as funding, that's a key challenge right now. I know our local department in Annapolis Royal is operating on a \$90,000-a-year budget. I know \$30,000 of that - one-third - is spent on insurance. I know the other \$60,000 is spent on equipment, training, and everything else. They can barely keep up, and it would take about 10,000 more breakfasts to even come close to that.

Without looking at the county, is there any ask by EMO or within the minister level or beyond for more funding to this department or to other departments on this critical equipment that's needed for these water rescues?

PAUL MASON: There has been no ask that has come to EMO for that particular type of equipment. Our main interface at that more tactical level - as laid out in the Act, each municipality has to have an emergency management coordinator organization plan. They would oversee and coordinate more with those first response assets within their communities. We don't have any dedicated funding streams from EMO for those kinds of assets. I know there are some funding streams - for example, the Emergency Services Provider Fund. There have been a couple of grant disbursements which have gone out to fire departments, ground search and rescue teams over the last couple of years of \$10,000

just recognizing some of the challenges we have been through over the past few years. We haven't received any specific requests for that.

[10:15 a.m.]

THE CHAIR: Mr. Canning.

TERRY CANNING: I just want to add, I was quite enthused when I heard the Premier's announcement of the Nova Scotia Guard because one of the first things that came to my mind that needs to follow along with that is that we need an assessment of the risks and threats across this province. Water rescue, of course, is one of those. It fits into that mould. I think to partially answer your question and concern, we need to do a thorough risk assessment across the province and find out where we have these risks. The second part is how do we deal with them?

CARMAN KERR: I want to reiterate; I know our local detachment - lots of friends and family at that detachment - they would need more survival suits for last night. They noticed that other boats and other teams coming in - and they're extremely thankful, obviously - were coming in with more modern equipment, equipment that they could have used last night. In the new EMO division or department, is there any discussion about how that model will change for funding? I know you said, Mr. Mason, that currently there's no ask, but does that new model suggest that there will be new funding streams or a new model of departments asking for more support in funding?

PAUL MASON: I think that's part of the evaluations and consultations to be going on over the next couple of months. The model can be a little bit different from province to province. Some of our contemporaries in other provinces do. It really depends on the operational posture, for lack of a better term. I know as that new department moves towards maturity in the Fall, there are discussions under way with a myriad of partners, including first response partners, municipalities, and others. I think the purpose of those is to identify those needs, identify the deliverables and the capacities we want to have. I think that would be part of that discussion.

CARMAN KERR: To Mr. Mason, as part of that consultation leading to the Fall, does that involve each individual department throughout the province? Or is that only with a certain representative of each area or community? Could you elaborate on who you're consulting with? I'm concerned about volunteer departments in Annapolis County. We have several of them, thank goodness. Is each chief or deputy chief being consulted in each department? Or is the Fire Service Association of Nova Scotia speaking on all those departments' behalf or otherwise?

PAUL MASON: I'm leading the consultations. I can't speak to the specifics of the strategy, but I can certainly say it's meant to be as broad and inclusive as possible. It's

certainly meant to get as diverse input from different stakeholders as we can, but I'm not sure exactly what level of who specifically would be contacted.

CARMAN KERR: I can appreciate that. Could I ask, Mr. Mason, that you follow up with this committee and give us a more specific breakdown or detail on how that consultation is happening?

PAUL MASON: Certainly.

CARMAN KERR: There's reference to the Nova Scotia Guard. Hopefully I'm not taking from my colleague at all, but I'm freestyling here a bit - I'm not going to rap. My questions around the Nova Scotia Guard would be: I know every department in my backyard is struggling to recruit. There are signs in every parking lot of every department throughout the province. To the fire service and EMO, will the Nova Scotia Guard help with recruitment to our volunteer fire departments, will there be no effect, or will it take away from that recruitment effort?

ROD NIELSEN: Time will tell, I guess, because there is so much unknown with the Nova Scotia Guard. Ever since COVID-19, we've been struggling more with recruitment for any volunteers, and especially the fire service. We are looking for opportunity with the Nova Scotia Guard to maybe attract people to our service, maybe not as firefighters but to be able to stand up as experts in their field to join the fire service. That may be one example of how we can accomplish that with the Nova Scotia Guard.

PAUL MASON: The only thing I would add to that is first of all, we're appreciative and acknowledging all the fabulous work done by all of our first response partners: fire departments, GSAR teams, and many other organizations. What we're seeing nationally, in discussions with my counterparts in other provinces - Ontario, Quebec, British Columbia - and nationally with the federal government led by Public Safety Canada with their efforts to stand up what they refer to as a civilian workforce, is really looking to try to harness that volunteer capacity to the greatest extent possible.

I think another potential advantage of the Guard beyond simply giving Nova Scotians an opportunity to put their skills to use in these events is a coordinating body, having somebody or an organization that can fulfill that function. Just from my own experience, I've been with EMO since 2012 in different capacities, and I've seen the role and the importance of these volunteer workforces within our response starting back in 2016 with the floods in Cape Breton where Samaritan's Purse Canada did great work in helping restore some of the homes that were impacted. Now we see the Mennonite Disaster Service come in, the Mennonite builders, Team Rubicon Canada, obviously volunteer, and fire departments, and the role of GSAR as well. They're definitely stepping up into this capacity along with their volunteer fire department partners in the civil response capacity.

That coordinating capability, that's what other provinces and the federal government is looking to build out. That along with harnessing these volunteers I think is part of the value that it can add to our capacity.

CARMAN KERR: This will be to the Fire Service. Is there a general ask that you can comment on on behalf of all fire departments of what they're looking for? Locally, medical first responder training is something that's flared up. I know we've organized training at the Annapolis Royal department. Other chiefs and members are coming into Annapolis Royal to get trained on that. We've put forward a bill to have that training covered, rather than come out of the department or out of members. Is there a push? Could you comment on medical first responder training, if that's something that Fire Service is pushing to have supported, and any other supports that maybe Fire Service is asking of government?

ROD NIELSON: I actually sit on the EHS Medical First Responders Stakeholder Relations Committee. That has been an ask of the Fire Service for over three years - to have the initial training and ongoing training covered for MFRs. At the last meeting, they told us that they are preparing for the budget for the next year to include cost recovery. What that looks like, I'm not absolutely sure, but that is the ask of the Fire Service.

CARMAN KERR: I appreciate that update. I hope to see that in the budget. Could you expand on any other ask of the Fire Service on behalf of our departments throughout rural Nova Scotia?

ROD NIELSEN: One of the programs that was federal was the old JEPP program, which allowed them to apply for things for emergencies such as the boats and the things that you talked about earlier. On the national level, which Wade sits on as a representative for Nova Scotia, they're looking for something not exactly JEPP, but something related to it and similar to it that would be able to put some of those demands. I'd say the other ask is governance. We, the rural fire services, are under the direction of a municipality. Annapolis County, for an example, is a small municipal unit on its own. The county and the - some of that guidance in there so we could have some consistency on our asks and also funding - funding models are structured.

CARMAN KERR: I'll just wrap up with a comment, but certainly thankful for all of you, thankful to my volunteers in Annapolis County and throughout the province, good relationships with our EMO management teams on the ground but looking for more support provincially from this government and federally to help our members on the ground.

Talking to members last night and this morning, they're rolling out of bed without any sleep, going back to work. Their kids are asking: Where were you last night and why aren't you around this morning? It's just another example where I feel like they're going above and beyond what they're expected or asked to do. They never say no. They always

show up, but it's getting to the point where when is enough enough? - with budget, and with their time, and everything else.

Thank you to everyone, and I'll hand it over to my colleague.

THE CHAIR: MLA Jessome.

HON. BEN JESSOME: Mr. Mason, when were you first made aware of the Nova Scotia Guard initiative, and what, if any, is the mandate aside from consulting with people across the province?

PAUL MASON: I can't remember the exact date - it was probably in January or February, along those times. With regard to the mandate for consultation, I'm not leading that particular piece. I know, as I noted earlier, it's meant to be broad and as inclusive as possible, but I'm not leading that particular piece of work so I can't say definitively.

BEN JESSOME: With respect to, I guess, capability to communicate with communities across the province, does the department have an awareness of exactly how capable each corner of the province is? Is there confidence that there is strong capability to connect effectively in every corner of our province? If so, please explain that, and if not, what is the department doing to ensure that we're consistent and capable from tip to tip?

PAUL MASON: What we do at EMO to ensure that kind of continuous improvement - for lack of a better term - is we do review the municipal emergency management plans from all municipalities every two years just to ensure that they're meeting the legislative requirements of the Act. That's how we established that baseline, and we provided training and exercise opportunities this year. We've got approximately 60 training exercises and events. Some are smaller; some are large, province-wide events. That's how we promote the adoption of best practices and a consistent service delivery model.

TERRY CANNING: I'd just like to add, with respect to the communications piece, MLA Jessome, that, again, when I first hear about the Nova Scotia Guard possibility or potential, that was one of the first questions that came to my mind - the communications piece. Clearly, communications - and when I say communications, I'm talking about two-way communications, obviously. That's a field that I've worked in for the past 20-some years. That is a critical role to any kind of response capability that I expect to be on the consultation with the Nova Scotia Guard group through the Fire Service Association of Nova Scotia. That's one of the points that I certainly will be raising. How do we achieve that piece of the puzzle? It's absolutely vital if we're going to see any kind of effective response that we have communications. I don't know the answer at this time, but I know it's a question that has to be addressed, for sure.

THE CHAIR: MLA Jessome with one minute left.

[10:30 a.m.]

BEN JESSOME: Mr. Mason, is there any inclination to modernize, update I'll say, the legislative requirements that municipal units are required to meet? The example that I can think of is our capital city, HRM, did not have the capability to put on a press conference in the middle of a wildfire in rural Halifax. In theory, our most endowed area of the province doesn't have the capability to run a press conference and communicate with the public. To me, that's a clear example of something that calls for modernization in our legislative requirements on our municipalities, and funding to help them make up any gaps that we're asking them to step up and modernize. Can you respond to that?

THE CHAIR: Not now, the time ran out. Order. (Laughs) NDP caucus. Who's up first? MLA Burrill.

GARY BURRILL: Yes, but would you like to respond to my colleague's question first before I go ahead?

PAUL MASON: Sure. To your point, we've seen these types of large-scale events like the fires we had in the Halifax area and the Barrington-Shelburne area, the floods that we've experienced, the more recent large snows. We're seeing these large events here in Nova Scotia, and unfortunately, we're seeing them really all over North America and certainly all over Canada. There have been a number of jurisdictions that have updated their legislation over the past four or five years. That really looks at my earlier points, looking at your operational posture, who's doing what, what the roles are of the various levels of government.

When you look at emergency management all across North America, and even within our current legislation, it starts with the municipality, it goes to the Province, and then in certain circumstances will reach back to the federal government. Those consultations will help inform what that legislation looks like when it comes forward in the Fall. I think the discussions that will happen, the cross-jurisdictional, that will help inform what the deliverables for the various partners are going forward.

THE CHAIR: MLA Burrill, your first question.

GARY BURRILL: I wanted to ask a couple of questions of the RCMP about follow-up with the Mass Casualty Commission recommendations, which certainly dovetail a lot with the subject we're dealing with today. One of them was that there should be - both from the force and from EMO - a review of call taker recruitment and training. Can you say where we are in response to this recommendation? Is the review in train, is it in place, or is it in a planning stage?

GLEN BYRNE: The RCMP has an extremely robust training curriculum for the RCMP call takers and dispatchers. It's a standardized process. I received the same training

as a dispatcher or call taker who's in British Columbia or Alberta or Newfoundland and Labrador. It's a very long process. Usually it takes anywhere - from the time we get somebody in the door, it's anywhere from nine months to a year before they're actually signed off and trained as meeting all the requirements of an RCMP call taker and dispatcher. In addition to that, Nova Scotia EMO provides us the 911 training.

I know following the incidents of April 2020, our operational policy centre in Ottawa has conducted a review of our training. It's still under review, and they make enhancements as necessary.

GARY BURRILL: Can you give us any sense of when that review might be completed, and some of the things that we might be able to expect in response to the recommendations from the commission?

GLEN BYRNE: Some of the things are around our protocols and procedures that were being done. For example, the inclusion of alerting and messaging, the enhancement of interoperability with our policing partners, the use of plain language, our radio communications, plain language versus use of 10-codes and encryption when working with external partners such as Fire Service, and things like that.

I think that side of it is done. I know provincially, for my centre, we completed an extremely detailed review of all our procedures and protocols around the questioning for dispatchers and call-takers - our 911 procedures, we reviewed. We updated a lot of those procedures immediately following the incidents of April 2020.

GARY BURRILL: A little bit related, I guess, to the same review. This question has been brought so much into the front and centre by the commission - the question of timely warnings being issued.

I wanted to ask, in the four years intervening, what improvements have been made in the RCMP's warning protocols? What are some of the specific changes that have been made, improvements that have been made, in response to the terrible events of four years ago?

GLEN BYRNE: There was a lot of change with alerting. We, the RCMP in Nova Scotia, conducted a detailed review of alerting. There was - we created both - we worked with our national partners. We created both national and provincial - or divisional - what I would say is divisional - policy around different types of alerts, such as vulnerable missing person or dangerous persons alerts and the serious incidents alerts.

We also conduct a lot of internal education and training around alerting. We conduct monthly tabletop exercising around public alerting. That's with not just our senior managers but our detachment commanders, operations NCOs, frontline constables - and

that's been ongoing for, I would say, close to a year now. They're scheduled - like I say, we schedule them monthly, and they will continue.

Enhancements - like I say, we created the policies around it. We've embedded, and we're constantly thinking about public safety now when dealing with any critical or significant incident. In fact, we are engaged in a strategic communications unit. Very early in the process, even before an incident would turn into a critical incident, right at the very beginning of an incident, when it's managed by our responders and our risk managers who are in our dispatch centre, we're engaging strategic communications right there. Alerting and messaging to the public - it's at the forefront and right from the time the file starts until it's over.

We've also, in addition to that, the delegation - there were multiple levels of authorization to send an alert. Since April 2020, and in those policies that we created, senior managers have delegated that authority to issue an alert. It would be up to my risk managers. That's my staff sergeants who sit in 24/7 and oversee the incidents. They've delegated that down. Again, we provide that training to them. They have the most current and relevant information regarding what's taking place on the ground. They're given the authority to issue those alerts right away.

Again, I have 12 of my risk managers and alternate risk managers trained to issue those alerts, as well as myself. We can issue alerts rather quickly. But we want to make sure that we have the relevant information to keep both the public and our members safe.

GARY BURRILL: Thank you for that explanation. I wanted to ask you, Mr. Mason, about - from EMO's point of view, some follow-up and response to some of the recommendations of the commission. One of those was to establish a phone line and a website that community members could use to report all sorts of information - not necessarily very specific burning information but also maybe some that might be peripheral - and also that there would be a way through this to get further information about responding to a public warning.

I'm wondering, where does EMO stand on a rollout of response to this recommendation?

PAUL MASON: There are nine recommendations that kind of relate to EMO. Some are in partnership with DOJ. That one specifically, I believe, is Recommendation P.21. We're meeting regularly with the Department of Justice and our policing partners on that specific recommendation and looking to develop some options to move up to fulfill that recommendation. It's really looking to strike a balance so that it can be operationally deployed quickly but at the same time deliver that ongoing access which you alluded to.

That, along with the other eight recommendations, we're moving forward on. We have completed one thus far. The others are all under way. We meet regularly, as I noted,

with DOJ and police but also with the larger governmental group moving those recommendations forward.

GARY BURRILL: Yet the core recommendation, that there would be a phone number to call, as one might call the power company when the power went out, doesn't seem complex. Is this something that we're going to be having in place pretty soon, or are we looking at a long process?

PAUL MASON: We expect to have it in place soon. It's under discussion with our partners at DOJ and police, but I take your point. It's not complex necessarily to roll out the phone numbers. We're looking to get that along with all of our other MCC recommendations executed as quickly as possible.

GARY BURRILL: Another one of the EMO-related recommendations that, at least from the distance of someone like me, doesn't seem that complex, is the one about the public education campaign to increase awareness of the public. I think the idea was in schools, what is a warning? What is the character of a warning? How ought you to respond to a warning? What is this all about? Where are we in an EMO response to this recommendation of moving the world of warnings closer to the centre of public consciousness in the province?

PAUL MASON: I believe that's Recommendation P.22. That one is under way as well. We have been meeting with the Department of Justice on that one. We're looking at different options on how we can move that forward. Obviously, there are really two key deliverables that we would see as related to that recommendation. One is obviously developing the materials and the strategy. The second phase would really be the execution. How do you socialize those along in the general populace? That work is under way.

GARY BURRILL: Following up on some of the things that Mr. Byrne was saying, thinking about it from EMO's point of view, what work is being done to improve the standard operating procedures for the emergency alert system from EMO's point of view?

PAUL MASON: What we have done with regard to the alert standard operating procedure is our initial standard operating procedures were developed back in 2017. After the tragic events of 2020, we revitalized those standard operating procedures and looked at some best practices in other provinces, particularly Saskatchewan. We used those to update our standard operating procedures, I believe in 2021. Like any of our programs, we're always finding things that can be tweaked or improved. The main way that we ensure - to use a term I noted earlier - operational readiness is through regularly engaging with our partners on that platform.

As was noted earlier, it's something that can be used - needs to be used - quickly when an event may happen. What we have done specifically beyond that is we have hired a dedicated person who is our Alert Ready program manager who kind of facilitates

quarterly training with all of our partners. Whether it be police agencies, municipalities, First Nations, we have a quarterly session with all of them just to ensure that their operational readiness is sharp. It's a shared process when it comes to the issuance of an alert. There's the request that comes in, and then that's executed in partnership with the provincial radio communications section, for lack of a better term, and our office, with the exception of RCMP and HRP, which have direct access and issue their alerts independently.

GARY BURRILL: I wanted to ask the Fire Service about the response to one of the other recommendations. I'm thinking about the encrypted mobiles. From your point of view, is the training that's being provided adequate for the new equipment? Are we behind on that? Where are we on the rollout as far as having it in all the hands it needs to be in, the encrypted equipment?

[10:45 a.m.]

TERRY CANNING: I'll handle that one, having been in that business for roughly 20 years. The rollout of the equipment is on schedule for this coming Fall. The Province has been extremely generous in the plan to replace existing equipment and in fact enhance the inventory of equipment and enhance the fire service quite significantly. As far as the training program, as far as I'm aware, it has not been developed at this point but is in that process. All I can say with respect to that is that I was involved in the rollout of the training program, the delivery of the equipment and training program in 2001, the first time the Province supported the fire service in radio communications equipment, and again in 2013 when we did the second generation.

I have every reason to think that the same sort of protocol and process will occur this time around. It was a very comprehensive process that required the training to be received before the equipment was received. I have no reason to think that that same thing won't happen this time around.

GARY BURRILL: Where are we on the rollout from a physical point of view? What percentage of our departments, roughly, have got equipment in hand?

TERRY CANNING: At this point, all the fire services in Nova Scotia have the interoperable TMR equipment of the current generation. The next generation - which I'm not sure what term is going to be used, whether it's TMR3 or whatever - nevertheless, at this time, none of it is in the hands of the fire service. The Department of Natural Resources and Renewables, I believe, has been transferred to the new system, and I think they are probably the only department at this time. As I say, the fire service is scheduled for the Fall, and as far as I'm aware, we're on schedule to get there.

GARY BURRILL: I'd like to go back to a question that you touched on a little bit with MLA Kerr earlier about the fire service's concerns about training. I think of the notice

that the service put out earlier this year about the concern about funding, that whatever the name is of that fund, the insurance levy that has been used, that has been in place for the last 10 or a dozen years to fund training isn't going to cut the mustard in terms of the current level of training that's required. The fire service put out the word that this was a concern.

At a time when adequate training of the fire service is so much in the public light through the Mass Casualty Commission, I wonder where this stands. Does the concern that you articulated earlier this year, does this still stand, or has it been adequately addressed? Where are you about this?

TERRY CANNING: That's an interesting question, and it's interesting to me in that I'm chairing the committee of the Fire Service Association of Nova Scotia that administers that fund. The situation is that that was a program that was introduced in 2012 to accommodate the fact the fire services respond regularly to motor vehicle collisions and fires with no compensation. We don't get any tax revenue from highway vehicles or highways, so this was a program that was put in place to generate funds from vehicle insurance policies.

It generated initially somewhere in the ballpark of \$325,000 to \$350,000 a year, and consistently, over the first eight to 10 years, I want to say, was underutilized by the fire service. Every year, we actually experienced a surplus. For whatever reason - I think there are numerous possible reasons, one of them being pent-up demand because of the pandemic and so on - in 2023, all of a sudden the providers of the training and the consumers of training, fire service volunteers, came out of the woodwork. Before the end of 2023, we were actually in a deficit situation and had to start telling the providers of the training that we simply had no money to pay them until the new calendar year.

In early 2024, we had a number of fairly extensive training programs run - January and February 2024 - and by March 1st, again, we were out of money for the 2024 funding. In my mind, that's a good thing, in that we have finally reached a point where the fire services - the volunteers - recognize the availability and are taking advantage of it. That was a challenge every year. When we reported to the Minister of Finance and Treasury Board on the status of the fund, we had to say: Well, we're trying to spend the money. We're trying to find programs that the fire services want.

I report at every meeting of the Fire Service Association of Nova Scotia board of directors where we're at and request from them input as to what they need in their respective communities and so on and so forth, and all of a sudden it paid off.

THE CHAIR: Order. Sorry, Mr. Canning. The NDP caucus time has run out.

Back to the PCs. MLA Barkhouse.

DANIELLE BARKHOUSE: Thank you all for being here, and for your service. I'm pretty lucky - I came from the municipal level of government before I came to provincial, so I understand quite a bit.

I want to talk about the Nova Scotia Guard. My first question is for Mr. Mason, which is: Why is the Nova Scotia Guard needed?

PAUL MASON: I would kind of just go back to my initial point that I was noting probably a few minutes ago. We're seeing the role played by volunteer agencies in our emergency response capacity becoming more and more significant over the last few years. As I noted, it's really starting with the Cape Breton floods back in 2016. That's when we started to have a lot more of these NGOs come to the fore.

Once again, we're not seeing that just here in Nova Scotia. We're seeing that right across the country. I think the value proposition, from my perspective, from an emergency management planning, response, and recovery perspective, what the Guard can bring to the table is really, firstly, as I said, providing a mechanism for people who maybe aren't currently engaged in some of our volunteer organizations to find a point of entry into either those organizations or into another capacity to assist in that response.

Also, the second deliverable is the coordinating capacity. When we're having these large-scale events, you've got multiple NGOs and different volunteer organizations deployed, sometimes in multiple parts of the province. Having the ability to have those more effectively tracked and those resources kind of pre-identified, and then to coordinate their response when we're actually in the midst of an event - I think the Guard can help fulfill those two deliverables.

DANIELLE BARKHOUSE: So then why start up a new one? Why not just add more concentrated resources to the current EMO?

PAUL MASON: I think it really goes back once again to the growth of the events that we've seen here from climate change. There are other risks, of course, out there as well, whether they be supply chain, cyber, those types of things. But even just in the events that we've actually experienced, EMO, certainly in my view, effectively performed its tasks over the past few years. But I think it's become apparent, as I kind of noted in my opening remarks, that with the increased scale, severity and prolonged response of these events, the capacities of the organization - I think a departmental level makes sense. I think that increased capacity, along with some of the new legislation and the Guard and some of these other functionalities that are coming to the fore, will better position us as a province to respond to these kinds of things.

DANIELLE BARKHOUSE: So then, how will the Nova Scotia Guard help address resource shortages during major events or emergencies?

PAUL MASON: I think it really comes down to, to build on my earlier point, having an as effective as possible understanding of the resources that you have available via the preplanning aspects of the Guard development, and then being able to effectively deploy them where they're needed during an event.

A good example would be the very significant snowfall in Cape Breton and Pictou Counties, and through those areas of the province. We worked closely with GSAR teams, volunteer firefighters, Team Rubicon Canada, and others to do over 1,400 wellness checks for people who needed assistance. I think that's an area where the Guard can strengthen things.

DANIELLE BARKHOUSE: I ask FSANS if they could put in their input on that question as well. Mr. Canning.

TERRY CANNING: Just reiterate the question, please.

DANIELLE BARKHOUSE: How will the Nova Scotia Guard help address resource shortages during major emergencies?

TERRY CANNING: I think that's one of the \$64,000 questions that's in front of us. Again, as I mentioned earlier, when I first heard about the inception of the Nova Scotia Guard, that was one of the first questions that jumped in my mind: How is this new structure going to assist the existing emergency response structures, most of them volunteer in Nova Scotia? I have spoken extensively with Minister Rushton and a few others about that question. They assure me that they are going to consult with us and make sure that happens.

I participated in an online town hall meeting with the Premier roughly two weeks ago, and again he assured us that this is an ongoing concern and plan to deal with. I tend to be the eternal optimist, and I guess I'm going to take the position at this point that the concept is a good one, the possibilities that it presents are positive for the province of Nova Scotia. I'm hoping that we can work together, co-operate, and make it happen.

I have some serious and grave concerns that we might be jumping into something without considering all of the ramifications of it, but again, I think we can prevail and make something good come out of it. I'm looking forward to that possibility.

DANIELLE BARKHOUSE: Before I hand it off, I will say that I think this as well, that it's going to be something good. The Tantallon fires - Nova Scotians are beautiful people, giving and loving, but when there's an emergency, they step up, and this is a great opportunity for Bluenosers to step up and find out where they fit in. You have people who could be doing something, but they're folding clothes for donations, so this is a great resource of our wonderful population.

I will pass this over to MLA Harrison.

THE CHAIR: MLA Harrison.

LARRY HARRISON: First of all, I want to thank all of you for, number one, your desire to bring this forward, to make sure that we are going to be safer in the future with emergency response disaster mitigation. My questions are going to be for the role the feds may have. Do we have a federal organization that's similar to FEMA in the U.S. that addresses disaster response and emergency management?

PAUL MASON: We do not. Basically, in the United States, I'm sure most of us are familiar, they have a large department called Homeland Security. There are many agencies that come under that: the FBI, a number of others, and FEMA does as well. Here in Canada, we have Public Safety Canada. There's also a department of emergency management, which is very closely aligned with Public Safety Canada. There's not the capacity at the federal level that they have with FEMA.

What we can do, and what we've done here, is we've been able to work closely with them. We have agreements in place under the umbrella of the Conference of New England Governors and Eastern Canadian Premiers where we work with our American counterparts in the New England states. Through those relationships, we've been able to leverage some of their FEMA training. We've had FEMA people come in last November and deliver training to provincial staff. We're looking to do that again next November and involve some of our municipal partners as well.

There's also a great wealth of documentation and training materials that FEMA makes available to us. In some cases, we have to rework that a bit to Canadianize it a little bit. It might refer to an American statute or what have you, so we'll have to input the Canadian equivalent.

Of course, FEMA has operational capacities as well. Basically, they can deploy instant management team and other resources into states, which have had impacts. I know we've had discussions with our federal counterparts on that. They're very focused on the civilian workforce capacity, but they are evaluating the American model and some of the other European models to build out some of their first response capacities as well.

THE CHAIR: Mr. Jennings.

WADE JENNINGS: I sit on the Canadian Association of Fire Chiefs on the National Advisory Council. One thing that we are asking of the federal government is to set up a version of the U.S. Fire Administration. We're looking to get something set up to try to get information out, and a way of gathering information and keeping records of calls and stuff.

[11:00 a.m.]

LARRY HARRISON: Public Safety Canada - do you want to elaborate a bit on the role or relationship that EMO has with them?

PAUL MASON: Public Safety Canada is really our federal counterpart. Basically, they do drive some national initiatives. For example, Alert Ready, they're the federal lead on that functionality. They administer the Disaster Financial Assistance Arrangements program, so when we have a large event, that's a federal program which the Provinces kind of administer. We'll work with them, and they are working on a number of other functionalities meant to position Canada to respond more effectively to some of these unprecedented events we've seen. A civilian workforce is probably foremost among that. Really, what they serve is our federal window into the larger federal government.

The only other thing I would add is when we have a request for assistance. If we have a large event here, and let's say we feel we need additional federal - it might be people, it might be specific assets - there is a request for assistance process that we complete. It goes forward to the federal government. Lots of times, people think it directly goes to the military, but the way the federal government actions that is they'll take it into an entity they have called the Government Operations Centre. They'll look at the request, and they'll look around the various assets the federal government has, and then they'll offer us what they think is the best fit. It could be military, it could be the Canadian Red Cross, it could be the Canadian Coast Guard. It really depends on the ask, but those are the main interfaces we have with Public Safety Canada.

LARRY HARRISON: Financially, though, do they really give a lot to that program? What's the relationship with Public Safety Canada?

PAUL MASON: There's no financial relationship. They don't provide any funding. For example, to your earlier question around FEMA, FEMA provides a large spectrum of different grants to both states and municipalities to try to encourage emergency preparedness by providing funding, or it might be an IT platform. There's nothing like that from Public Safety Canada, with the exception of the Disaster Financial Assistance Arrangements program. As was noted earlier by some of my fellow panelists, they used to provide the JEPP program, which was a great program that was available. We would administer and flow it down to first response agencies. I believe that was cancelled around 2014 or so. Beyond that, there's not a financial relationship.

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

THE CHAIR: MLA MacDonald.

JOHN A. MACDONALD: Thank you all for being here. I just wanted to make a couple comments before I start, based on the comments from my colleague across the way.

I just want to be clear - and this is really going to go to FSANS who wants to. Fire is dealt with by the municipalities, not by the provincial government through legislation. Would you agree or disagree with that statement?

ROD NIELSEN: Yes, that's totally true and right now, our focus of FSANS is on governance and that very issue. Our Joint Municipal Fire Services Committee, that is also their focus currently. Again, with the numerous different requests that fire service looks after for a multitude of different types, that is definitely a concern.

JOHN A. MACDONALD: I represent 13 volunteer fire departments, 14 if you include one First Nations. I would just suggest that municipalities should be talking to each other because the Municipality of the District of East Hants a number of years ago created a training fund so that their department could access that, and get money out of that. They also created a fund for the insurance, so all the building insurance is actually shared amongst all the municipalities. I would submit that it would be better for them to be talking amongst their municipal funders and see what they'll do. I know that, for example, in East Hants there have been at least two training grounds created/enhanced - tens of thousands of dollars a year paid for MFR or different training so that they're not having to do that. I just figured I would give those comments.

Just to highlight one thing since it was raised - and I know because Mr. Nielsen has had the pleasure of, or the bane, during my tenure to have me on scene - mutual aid agreements. Normally, we have to do up a list: Here is all of our apparatus we have when we come to a call. Municipalities have it. I think they're shared with all the departments. I'm sure FSANS has it also. I'm just wondering, am I correct that each department has a list so you can actually go through, and your mutual aid agreements help. Mr. Canning is telling me no. Who has it after they do it? I know we submit it to the municipality and to our association in East Hants. I think Mr. Nielsen and Mr. Canning are going to answer this for me.

ROD NIELSEN: With the different municipalities across the province, I can suggest that there are probably as many different variations of that as there are municipalities. One thing that has been key is that we stood up a committee after the various reports. It's called the Joint Municipal Fire Services Committee, which has representatives on it from the Association of Municipal Administrators Nova Scotia. In this case currently, it would be the Department of Municipal Affairs and Housing, the Office of the Fire Marshal.

So we have elected officials, and we have very good representation across the table. These are the topics that come up. Basically, they're not consistent across the province on how the municipalities roll out. There are some advisers from the provincial government who try to go around and make it more consistent, but we have seen a continuous change of these people. That's not helping the system to be able to get everybody educated on how it works.

Looking at the Nova Scotia Guard, that suppository of information - repository. You know what I meant. (Laughter)

JOHN A. MACDONALD: I know what you meant.

ROD NIELSEN: It may feel like that sometimes.

I'm looking forward to that being part of this Nova Scotia Guard - that there will be some sort of database that we can extract. I can speak on behalf of Colchester. We do not have that list. It's done by the association, not by the municipality.

TERRY CANNING: I just want to elaborate a little bit. As I have said before, at the risk of being a broken record, this is another one of the concerns that came to my mind when I heard about the creation of the Nova Scotia Guard - the fact that one of the promises, if you will, that it presents is an inventory of resources. That's wonderful. That's absolutely essential. But we certainly don't have it today. As Chief Nielsen says, we have it within the municipal level - in our case created by the Colchester Fire Fighters' Association, not the municipality. It would be shared amongst the fire services in Colchester County, but I don't think it would be shared beyond the boundaries of Colchester, unless there was a direct relationship between a fire service in Colchester and a fire service in East Hants, as an example, or one in Pictou County, one of the neighbouring fire services sort of thing.

I think that's one of the challenges and opportunities for the Nova Scotia Guard - to create and maintain that inventory of resource.

I want to emphasize the importance of "maintain," because in the 35 years that I've been in the volunteer fire service, the one consistent thing is the inability to keep an accurate list of resources. They change virtually overnight. I can't count the number of times we've dealt with a barn fire, for example. With a barn fire, as you may know, MLA MacDonald, you basically have to tear the barn apart to extinguish the hay that's in it. To do that, you need an excavator. To get an excavator, you have to have a flatbed trailer. To do that, you have to know where to find those, and the damn things move all over the province.

That's the challenge that I see with keeping an accurate record of resources. They change so consistently that somebody is going to have to be tasked with maintaining that almost on a daily basis. I think it would be a wonderful tool to have at our hands, but it's going to require some investment and time and effort, for sure.

THE CHAIR: Thank you. Six seconds. (Laughs) Thank you, on his behalf.

For the next round we have 10 minutes each. That'll finish up around 11:40 a.m.

MLA Jessome.

HON. BEN JESSOME: Chair, through you to our guests from the RCMP, I'm wondering about the back end of an emergency situation. To put it exactly, we experienced a wildfire in the Upper Tantallon area. A decision was made by the RCMP not to advance or to move forward with criminal charges. The decision was made in the Fall. It was only through an access-to-information request that the community found out that there wouldn't be criminal charges laid with respect to the cause of that wildfire.

We're here to talk about responses, and we're talking about communication. For me, this is one of the most important questions that my community is asking me. I think an important question for us all to reflect on is: What is the RCMP's responsibility with respect to reporting this type of decision to the public?

THE CHAIR: Mr. Frizzell.

ROBERT FRIZZELL: The RCMP's principal role would be to gather that evidence or information to see if it would support charges. We then take that information and share it with the Nova Scotia Public Prosecution Service, which is an independent body.

At the end of the day, there are kind of two tests to determine if charges will be laid. The threshold, the first test for the RCMP, is reasonable probable grounds to believe that it happened. That's kind of the 50-plus-one, if you will, for us. The Crown, or the Public Prosecution Service, then has their - their test is the likelihood of conviction. They'll go and look at it in total, and they have a bunch of different things that I can't really speak to, because that's them, and then they'll determine if they want to go through with charges.

Often for larger files such as this one that you mentioned there, we will start to collaborate with the Crown right at the very onset. At the very first stage, we'll start to share the information and the evidence that we've gathered, and then collaboratively determine whether charges are appropriate or not.

It comes into a tricky part if some of that information might be restricted or protected because it might be sensitive. We'll use our system to determine if charges - and the Crown will do theirs. At the end of the day, whoever decides not to lay the charges is primarily responsible for communicating that and sharing that with the public. Often there's a lot going on behind the scenes, or information that we can't share that made part of the determination. We try to work through that and be as transparent as we can and give all the information we can give, but often that can sometimes cause confusion or a disconnect, simply because we can't share all the information on why.

We'll strive to work on that and give clear messaging, but that's unfortunately the reality of the justice system, the criminal charges.

[11:15 a.m.]

BEN JESSOME: Is it possible for you to - how can I phrase this? Is it possible for you to provide the committee with a response to the request to make somebody available to answer questions on how this decision was concluded - to the public? We've had an amazingly, profoundly terrible year at home. People want to know what happened here and how people got to that conclusion. We're here to talk about communicating with the public and with inter-agency communications and communicating with the public. Can you please provide the committee with a response to a request for the RCMP to make themselves available to answer questions on how that determination was made?

ROBERT FRIZZELL: We can definitely be committed to try to help clarify that. The hiccup that I see at the onset is that there will be, like I mentioned, some information that can't be shared even with the committee or members of Parliament. That has hurdles that we can try and overcome, for sure, just due to the level of that privileged information. Number two is that the decisions aren't made in isolation. There is that Public Prosecution Service part as well. I can't speak on their behalf that they would be willing to. I think you would have to reach out and clarify with them, but there will be a part of both of those voices having a key piece of that puzzle to give you a full picture, if that's even possible. We can definitely commit to looking into that and reaching back to the committee. There would be a lot of legalities and technicalities that we would have to de-conflict for that to go ahead.

BEN JESSOME: I appreciate that there are some intricacies that will have to be looked at before coming back to the table. I just wanted to get the ball rolling. Thank you for that response and that commitment.

The past budget for the Emergency Management Office reflects a decrease in funding. The minister at the time during Estimates related that to an amortization of the 911 system, I guess representing that it has depreciated over time; therefore, it represents less on the books. For a government that has introduced the Nova Scotia Guard, a newly branded or branding exercise for the EMO without an increased budget to execute this as a priority - how does that stack up?

PAUL MASON: I guess my thought on it would be that as the consultation process rolls forward and the department forms what it will look like when it comes to full fruition in the Fall, my expectation would be that whatever the budget requirements are of that new model, they would obviously need to be part of that - whether that be staffing costs, whether there potentially could be any programs associated. That would be informed by the consultations and then go forward. That would be how I would expect that to proceed. Obviously, I only have input in certain aspects of that, but that would be my thought.

BEN JESSOME: What is the best way for members of the public or elected officials to get involved in that consultation process? A big part of the response to

Portapique and the recommendations in the Mass Casualty Commission report was to reinforce and help coordinate the voices and capacity of local entities. While I think our local emergency responders of all stripes and professions are a good first pool for consulting with, probably the best, I think the experience that I had was that there was a lot of unofficial leaning on local organizations. I think the Lions Club, the homeowners associations that were charged to - it was a full-time job on top of their full-time jobs to give out resources to community members.

I'd like to know: As we move to the Summer to consult on what we hope will be a fruitful outcome, how do these local and, I'll say, unofficial organizations get involved in this consultation process so that we don't miss opportunities?

PAUL MASON: I know that there have been steps already taken where people can call 211 if they're interested in joining the Guard. As I said, I'm not leading the consultation piece. I've had some involvement. I would expect that there will be more communication and more availability for people who are interested, both in the consultation and the Guard generally, in the coming weeks.

THE CHAIR: Order. Time has run out again. Is it MLA Hansen I see prepping? MLA Hansen.

SUZY HANSEN: My question is for EMO. Misinformation spreads when individuals unknowingly share inaccurate information. We saw this happen with the recent wildfires with some false information being spread about lifting evacuation orders. Many were relying on privately run Twitter accounts or folks in community for updates because it was the only place to find clear and timely updates. My question is: What is being done now to ensure better information is being shared and making sure that we don't continue that same process if another emergency happens again?

PAUL MASON: Where we're looking at things within the purview of EMO, it's primarily through our alerts website and what have you. When we have large-scale events like the wildfires or snowfalls or floods or what have you, the Province stands that website up. We work closely with Communications Nova Scotia, and that, along with the government X - or formerly Twitter - account or what have you, are probably the best places to get information, at least from the provincial perspective.

Depending upon the scope of the event, it might be an event which is fairly contained within a specific municipality, and obviously they would be speaking to their citizens as well through their various channels. Our people at Communications Nova Scotia would work with those municipal reps to try to ensure that messages are aligned and accurate.

Certainly we've seen a lot during events that there's a lot of stuff that circulates on social media. People post pictures from several years ago and position it as if it's actually

happening now. The best advice I can give is to follow trusted government sources when you're in the midst of those events. It's where you'll get the best information.

SUZY HANSEN: I wanted to ask a question to the Fire Service Association, just reiterating what my colleague was asking about funding. It's the VILF, I believe, is it? You said there was a deficit for 2023. What does that mean now for training opportunities or continuing the work that is being done? What does that mean now for members? Has the provincial government stepped up and given funding to be able to provide that training or to help you through that?

TERRY CANNING: The short answer is that the provincial government has not done anything aggressively or immediately. This is not taxpayers' dollars that we're playing with, so there was no expectation on the part of the Fire Service Association that the government should step up and do anything. We were simply the administrators of a levy fund that comes from insurance premiums. The one thing that we have approached the Province to do - and we've been assured that they will take it under consideration - is to increase the levy from 50 cents per insurance policy per year to \$1 per insurance policy per year, effectively doubling the resource, if you will.

As I say, we've made that request. We received acknowledgement that the request was received. Hopefully we'll see the increased funding, but I have no commitment at this point, of course.

If I might just add - the rate is established in the Act that created the fund. It's not a simple matter of the Governor-in-Council making the change. It has to go to the Legislature and be amended. It's a bit more problematic than I had hoped it would be.

SUZY HANSEN: I'm glad you mentioned that, because I was going to say: Is that in legislation? Because if it is, it shouldn't be problematic if we know that there is funding that's necessary to be able to lift up the services that we so need, and that are truly beneficial to every part of our province. Absolutely, I thank you for clarifying that. I can take that back and we can have a discussion about that.

How many more minutes do I have, Chair? Five?

Just in case I don't get to say this during my time, because as we know, time goes very quickly in this room, I want to thank each and every service member, each and every emergency service, our RCMP, all of our members across this province, who are doing amazing work - a lot of them during their volunteer time, and a lot of them doing it because they love their community, and they love the things that they do to help uplift their community.

I want to say that when we heard about the Nova Scotia Guard, it was a surprise to us as well. We had no idea that was even a consideration or thought. Our initial reaction

was: Have we contacted the service providers who are doing the great work right now, and how are we lifting them up to be able to help incorporate their services, to continue helping more Nova Scotians?

I say that to preface that I know the Emergency Management Office is doing amazing work in their own right. We just talked about how there are gaps in communication. We just talked about how there's necessary funding needed. We just talked about how we don't know the parameters around the Nova Scotia Guard as yet, but we're announcing things without knowing anything about what that looks like yet. Then we're also not consulting with folks who are doing this work in the province initially, before an announcement is made.

My thought is, with EMO rolling out this process, I'm concerned that when we make announcements about putting forward a new idea, which will definitely be something great for this province if it's done properly, with the proper consultation, working with those who have the skill set - I'm concerned that, as my colleague said, there's no funding in the next budget to be able to offset that. We mention this all the time: We're asking folks to do this work and give input and consult and do all of these things, but there's no budget behind that.

I'm just concerned that - is there an ask, possibly from EMO to the Minister of Finance and Treasury Board, to the government specifically, to be able to help get all of the things that need to be done to get this process off the ground in the right way, with the proper feedback and proper consultation?

PAUL MASON: My understanding on how this will move ahead, and the part that I would play with, as I said - these consultations will roll out over the next couple of months. They will help inform what the final version of the department of emergency management looks like. Obviously, depending on what that structure, those capabilities, anything around potential grants, if that's within or out of scope - that will help inform what the budgetary needs are for that department. That's how I would see that going, and really being informed by these consultations over the next couple of months.

THE CHAIR: MLA Hansen with 2 minutes and 20 seconds left.

SUZY HANSEN: Great. I thought I had a little bit of time.

I want this to be in consideration to make this public for all folks to be able to give input, but even to share their skill set and share their services. I wanted to ask - and anyone can answer this; I know that's an open question. We know that we have a shortage of volunteers across this province, and I know that the fire services experience that, as well as other service providers in our province. The expectation for us to roll something out without any of the funding attached, and as well, with a low volunteer rate - how are we expecting to be able to - and I'm very optimistic - pull something together in a way that's

going to help Nova Scotia? I know you'll be able to explain it a little bit more from the department side, but I'm curious to know how that might look.

[11:30 a.m.]

PAUL MASON: I think certainly from my perspective, the two main things that will help inform how we can successfully implement the Guard are really these consultation processes rolling forward over the next several months. I think that is a great opportunity to get ideas from a lot of these different stakeholders, and also vet some of the ideas as they move along. I think the other thing, as I touched on in some of my earlier comments, is Nova Scotia is not alone in the scale and the frequency of events that we've seen, unfortunately. A lot of these other jurisdictions are grappling with these problems and looking at similar mechanisms for solutions.

These types of civilian-based volunteer workforces can deliver a lot of value. Ontario's moved a lot on that front, as Quebec is undertaking now. That can also help inform those consultations, so we're not inventing it from a point of zero. We can look at best practices from other jurisdictions, move forward with the consultations, and have that inform what the final construct may look like here in Nova Scotia.

SUZY HANSEN: Communication is key, and that is the key to making things successful.

THE CHAIR: Time has run out. Thank you. Back to the PC caucus. MLA MacDonald has a question.

JOHN A. MACDONALD: Just to get back to my question since my preamble, and this will be toward one of the RCMP members: Has the RCMP utilized the direct access that's been given to them for the Alert Ready system? If so, how has that impacted response?

GLEN BYRNE: We've used it quite a bit, I must say. We received full access - I think it was in August 2021 - and to date we've issued 25 alerts. Of those alerts, they've been vulnerable missing persons alerts, dangerous persons alerts, serious incidents alerts, and we've issued an AMBER Alert. We do issue them when needed.

How does it affect response? We take the request to issue an alert from the frontline members who are constantly assessing the need for an alert, as well as our risk managers who are sitting in our Operational Communications Centre with the overarching most current information. We take that and we judge that against keeping the public safe. We will utilize it when necessary.

THE CHAIR: MLA Taggart.

TOM TAGGART: Before I start my questioning, I just really have to say that our rural fire brigades are very well represented here today from Colchester County for sure. I just have to say a great big thank you. I have 25 years in the fire services, 20 years since I was involved in it - the challenges that you folks have taken on from what was really basically firefighting back in, say, 1993 or 1994 or whatever, to the medical first responders, to responding to floods.

Our communities turn to the volunteer fire brigade members in time of need every single time. I don't know where we'd be without you folks. One of the great things about that, and I was thinking about that, reflecting on the Guard, is that folks who have been doing this because that's where their heart takes them or whatever, they passionately want to support their community. I believe that the Guard will be successful with the successful co-operation between the folks who have been doing this for years and the government - that sort of thing. I just needed to say that. I'm sure people who don't live in the country can really realize the value of the volunteer fire brigades and mutual aid system and all that. I just wanted that on the record.

My first question is just a quick one to the RCMP. I just want to confirm: In the case of an emergency alert, the staff sergeant has the authority to issue that immediately without someone reviewing it, without somebody checking the wording and that sort of thing? Is that something that can go out like that?

GLEN BYRNE: The authority to issue alerts has been delegated down to our risk managers. Based on the information that they have, they have the ability to immediately issue an alert. If you think of an active shooter, they're going to obtain as much information on the subject - the location, et cetera. Based on their years of experience, the training they receive, they will issue that alert. Of course there is more oversight. They will probably get probably the supervisor, the OCC supervisor sitting next to them, to review the wording to make sure it's clear and concise. We also have templates that we'll use to send out alerts rather quickly in the event that our strategic communications people aren't around. If it's an immediate alert that has to go out, we can just pull right from that.

TOM TAGGART: I think there's a difference between the staff sergeant on duty and the risk manager, right? Is the staff sergeant able to do that alert without - that's the million-dollar question.

GLEN BYRNE: Yes, the staff sergeant is our risk manager in the OCC, and they have the authority to issue those alerts.

TOM TAGGART: This is to the RCMP as well. Has the RCMP worked to improve relations with other police agencies to enhance public safety? Can you share any examples of that.

GLEN BYRNE: I think we have done quite a bit in that. Over the last number of years, we have certainly seen a lot more interoperability with our external partners. When it comes to the policing side, we have had several large joint operations in policing for takedowns or seizures. We have worked with our external partners on large-scale natural disasters such as the fires and the floods. They were all utilized by using the instant command system and unified command. We would have representatives of the RCMP in those areas as well.

We have done a lot of interoperability for the radio system. We ensure that we have clear and concise communications with all policing partners. We conduct weekly interoperability tests and secure testing with encrypted radios with every municipal police agency in the province as well as the larger dispatch centres of the province, being Cape Breton, Halifax, and Shubenacadie Radio - as well as some other external partners.

We also do quite a bit of joint training. Our emergency response team in the division has been doing a lot of the training, not just with Halifax Regional Police Emergency Response Team. We've also just recently conducted several ERT team leaders training courses. It was a week long. We had representatives from Newfoundland RCMP, New Brunswick RCMP, Nova Scotia RCMP, Halifax Regional Police, Fredericton Police Force, Royal Newfoundland Constabulary. They were all here part of that training. It ended with several days of scenario-based training to ensure the interoperability. It went very, very well and was very well received by all these other policing agencies around the region. We do a lot that way.

I must say that we don't have full interoperability - the emergency response team doesn't have full interoperability with Halifax Regional Police, but they're very interoperable with them. Halifax Regional Police Emergency Response Team will quite often assist our emergency response team for calls within the province of Nova Scotia, especially around the HRM. There's a lot we do there.

My emergency management unit conducts extensive ICS training. It's the command system training at different levels - ground search and rescue, incident commander's training. We always open that up to our external partners - our federal partners and provincial partners, the local GSAR teams, our volunteer fire departments, et cetera. There's a lot of interoperability we have. That's one of our big focuses the last number of years: how to increase that interoperability with all of our external partners, not just police.

TOM TAGGART: With one minute, 28 seconds left, I'll go to EMO. I'd just like you to give a wrap-up, I guess, on how does the new legislation, Bill No. 455, strengthen the Province's response to emergencies and work better with municipalities?

PAUL MASON: I think the value that the new legislation can bring - it really even builds on some of the points that the RCMP were making - that interoperability, that

partnership with our various partners. Municipal is key, with other departments is key. A lot of our legislation is dated. I think updating that legislation, along with the larger capacity the department can bring to the table, will better position EMO and the province generally, so that we can operate as effectively amongst the various departments - we have some that we work with more closely than others, such as Natural Resources and Renewables - and of course with our municipal partners. I think that's where we can gain value and be better prepared through this work.

TOM TAGGART: Thank you, everyone. Is there anybody at the fire service who'd like to finish up or comment on what they'd like to see out of the Guard?

THE CHAIR: Time's up. (Laughter) Sorry, MLA Taggart.

Time has come to an end for the questioning. I'd go back to the witnesses and ask if any of you have any closely remarks, briefly.

ROD NIELSEN: Just briefly, thank you very much, everyone, for the ability to be here and collaborate. One of the key things we look at in the fire service is education, right from top to bottom on how things work and including the Alert Ready system and how EMO works, right down to our grassroots, back up through to - we even have a federal HUSAR team here in Halifax. How do we get activated? How do municipalities do all that stuff?

One thing to address the alert system: We at FSANS do not support fire chiefs having direct access. We want to go through the other channels. As far as the Nova Scotia Guard, we believe that consultation will be key to how this unfolds. We look at it in a positive light.

In the end, thanks so much, everybody.

THE CHAIR: Mr. Canning, I believe you put your hand up?

TERRY CANNING: Yes, just one very brief comment I want to make. In reviewing the material for this discussion, it appeared as though a major piece of it was the Alert Ready program. There's one piece of that that I do want to comment on and ask Mr. Mason to take away with him, if he will. That is the fact that we do not seem to have - and I stand to be corrected - any method for ending an emergency alert. We have a very robust system to get them out there - and I think I've heard all 25 that Mr. Byrne mentioned that they've issued over the last few years - but we rarely seem to get a notice that it's finished.

I would note the most recent one, in the community of Bible Hill - I think it was last week where there was an armed individual wandering around the community. We got the alert, and everybody locked down and so on and so forth, and within an hour the incident

apparently was closed, but I learned that through listening to CBC Radio. I think we need to close the loop, if you will.

THE CHAIR: Any further closing remarks?

As Chair of the committee, I want to thank you for your time. Also, as a first responder myself, I truly appreciate everything you folks do on a daily basis, and I appreciate the questioning from both sides of the floor here. They were open and honest, good questions - good for our community.

With that, we'll call a five-minute recess so you folks can leave, and we'll come back for closing business.

[11:44 a.m. The committee recessed.]

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

THE CHAIR: Order. I call the committee back to order. With committee business, we have a letter that's been passed out. Deputy Minister Justin Huston has responded to three requests for information regarding a decrease in the total number of funded projects, the impact of the Nourishing Communities Food Coupon Program, and the number of grants dedicated to supporting 2SLGBTQIA+ community, made at the February 6th Community Services meeting. Are there any questions or discussion on that? Good to move forward?

The next topic is the Nova Scotia Federation of Municipalities. They were supposed to be at the meeting today. I think we all know what happened there. Is there any conversation or comments, or are we okay with that? I just want to give you the opportunity to speak on it, because I think it was an NDP topic. I think it was, so I wanted to bring it forward.

Any other business?

CARMAN KERR: I'd just like to make a motion for you as Chair to write the national minister for an update on that Alert Ready review.

THE CHAIR: Questions on the motion? Ready to vote on the motion?

All those in favour? Contrary minded? Thank you.

The motion is carried.

HON. BEN JESSOME: I'll start with a question because perhaps one of the government members can answer it before I make a motion. The consultations that are

taking place with respect to the EMO and Nova Scotia Guard, will there be a report that gets produced publicly at the end of consultations? Through the Chair to any of the members who might be able to answer that question.

THE CHAIR: I'll move to members first.

JOHN A. MACDONALD: I would submit that I don't know. It just came out. That's why the bill was brought out, so there was plenty of consultation. I don't think anybody is going to know until the consultation is done what the process is. I'm confused for the question.

BEN JESSOME: I move that the committee directs the Chair to reach out to the minister responsible for EMO inquiring about whether he intends to produce a public report on the information gathered during consultations on the EMO and Nova Scotia Guard.

THE CHAIR: You heard the motion.

TOM TAGGART: I expect that the results of the consultation will be in the legislation. That would be my view on that. I think it would be no different than any other legislation.

SUZY HANSEN: I think that's why the question is being asked, because it's not in legislation right now as it stands. I think the piece of legislation that was brought forward wasn't very complete for it to give the information based on whether there was public information given at the end of the consultation. I think that is just the ask - making sure that all the information that we receive via the consultation is transparent and open to the public so that there can be a viewing of what the Nova Scotia Guard will look like.

JOHN A. MACDONALD: I'll just be honest. The motion kind of confuses me just because we have a bill - the House isn't sitting at this moment - that's there, that hasn't even gone to second reading. We're now being asked to send a letter asking that something be done when consultation isn't even done. I think this is one of those horse above . . . (interruption) thank you. It's weird they say that, because I don't understand that rationale, because the horse is supposed to be in front of the cart. I digress.

For me, I can't support sending a letter that's saying: You're going to do this when a) the consultation's not done. It hasn't even really started. (Interruption) That makes more sense, cart before the horse - when the bill was presented, so that the consultation and discussions could be done. I just think at this point, I think these are questions that can be asked by members if they want to ask them. I don't see the point of our issuing a letter directing - which is basically what you're asking - because this committee does not direct anybody other than to write letters. For me, I just can't support it because there is no consultation done. They're working it out. That's my comment on it.

THE CHAIR: Before I go to MLA Taggart, I would ask all committee members to keep comments down so we can get through the rest of these speakers.

TOM TAGGART: I'll be very brief. I would sit in the Legislature and get accused of not consulting, so something of this kind of - for me - significance and importance, I'm very happy that it was announced, and we have the whole Summer to consult and work it through. I think it was a wise thing to do. I don't know if the minister might - I don't know - I have no idea why it was the way it is, but I can tell you I'm very supportive of the idea. The volunteer firefighters who will play a critical role in this have lots of time to iron out the bugs so we're not back at it and that sort of thing. I'm very happy with the way it is.

BEN JESSOME: I did not suggest that we're directing a minister. What I explicitly said was that we direct the Chair to inquire about whether or not the minister intends to make a report on the consultations public. I'm not against consulting with any of the agencies. I think it's a reasonable and good idea to consult with these groups. What I'm asking - and I thought it was pretty basic - we've seen - the DNRR just produced a report that they made public in response to a situation. The government in the last day of the legislative session announced that they were going to do a round of consultations on this Nova Scotia Guard, and they've been very profound in saying that this is a great idea.

All I'm asking is: Does the minister intend to make the information that's gathered through consultation public in the form of a public report? It really doesn't - I'm not trying to be tricky. I'm just trying to get a response as to whether or not this will be information that we'll be able to reflect upon as we go back to the Legislature in the Fall to debate what is supposed to be a fairly profound change to emergency management in the province. It's not cryptic.

SUZY HANSEN: Just for clarity because I think this is a friendly ask - I don't think this is something that is being - and it's asking us to write a letter to just put this on the forefront so that folks can actually remember because we know that sometimes legislation is put forward and we don't always have everything crossed and dotted. What we're asking is just a friendly look to keep in mind that we can make sure that the information is public and transparent because I think that's the value of what Nova Scotians want.

It's not - because I'm reading the Act right now. I just read the bill and nowhere does it state that there'll be any public consultation or public information shared. I think that is what we heard today. It was about communication and things being shared openly so that everyone understands what that is. I don't want it to because it doesn't necessarily need to be this long. I think it's just us asking of the Chair to write a letter to make sure that this is not missed, that they can consider possibly adding it within whatever they're doing through consultation and making it public so that folks can actually see and be involved in the work that is needed with the Nova Scotia Guard.

TOM TAGGART: Yeah, so, you know, I just - I don't fully understand why we're doing this. I don't know that this is our place to start questioning the lead-up to every bill. Are we going to ask for consultation or a report on every bill that comes before the Legislature? I don't think that's the place for - I don't think this committee - this committee is not the place for this. This committee is - in my view - anyway, I think it's a great bill. I think that the idea that we'll have all Summer long through to the Fall to really get out and understand, and educate people on what's going on on such a critical kind of a . . .

[12:00 p.m.]

THE CHAIR: Order. Time is up.

The next meeting is June 4th. The topic is Addressing the Homelessness Crisis. Witnesses are the Affordable Housing Association of Nova Scotia, the Department of Community Services, the Department of Municipal Affairs and Housing, the Department of Seniors and Long-term Care, the Nova Scotia Provincial Housing Agency, and Shelter Nova Scotia.

Meeting adjourned.

[The committee adjourned at 12:00 p.m.]