

HANSARD

NOVA SCOTIA HOUSE OF ASSEMBLY

STANDING COMMITTEE

ON

COMMUNITY SERVICES

Tuesday, April 1, 2025

Committee Room

Reducing Financial Barriers for Children and Families

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COMMUNITY SERVICES COMMITTEE

Hon. Susan Corkum-Greek (Chair)

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Kyle MacQuarrie

Suzy Hansen

Lina Hamid

Hon. Iain Rankin

Hon. Derek Mombourquette

[Brad McGowan was replaced by Hon. Brian Wong.]

In Attendance:

Erin Fowler
Legislative Counsel

Tamer Nusseibeh
Legislative Committee Clerk

WITNESSES

Department of Opportunities and Social Development

Craig Beaton
Deputy Minister

Frazer Egerton
Executive Lead, Strategic Initiatives

Tracy Embrett
Executive Director, Child and Family Wellbeing

Nicole Hazlehurst
Project Director



HALIFAX, TUESDAY, APRIL 1, 2025

STANDING COMMITTEE ON COMMUNITY SERVICES

10:00 A.M.

CHAIR

Hon. Susan Corkum-Greek

VICE CHAIR

Brad McGowan

THE CHAIR: Order. I call this meeting to order. This is the Standing Committee on Community Services. I am the honourable Susan Corkum-Greek, MLA for Lunenburg and Chair of this committee. Today we will hear from presenters regarding Reducing Financial Barriers for Children and Families.

I would remind everyone - while checking my own phone - to make sure the sound is turned off. Please put them on silent. In the case of an emergency, please use the Granville Street exit and walk up to the Grand Parade as our marshalling point. Hopefully that won't be necessary.

I will now ask committee members to please introduce themselves for the record by stating their name and constituency.

[The committee members introduced themselves.]

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

Again, the topic today is reducing financial barriers for children and families. I welcome our witnesses, and I would ask you to please introduce yourselves. Perhaps we'll begin on my far left, please.

[The witnesses introduced themselves.]

THE CHAIR: Thank you for being here, and importantly, thank you for - all the work of government is important, but in particular, the work that is captured within your department addresses some of our most vulnerable and is very important work.

Who will be providing - okay. Deputy Minister Beaton, if you'd like to begin with opening comments, please.

CRAIG BEATON: Good morning and thank you for the opportunity to be here. The topic for today's appearance is Reducing Financial Barriers for Children and Families. It's certainly an important time to have this discussion, when affordability is a key issue in communities across the province. Government recognizes that and has taken a holistic approach to addressing affordability and reducing financial barriers for families.

At the Department of Opportunities and Social Development, we work with our colleagues across government with a focus on actionable solutions, and what that does is it allows us to leverage not only programs and services from across government but also insights and resources to find and create solutions that meet people's needs today. In recent months, we've seen actions on affordability in various forms: lower taxes, higher minimum wage, historic investments in housing, the new Nova Scotia School Lunch Program, and many more.

In our department, you've seen actions in other ways. We've increased income assistance rates and indexed them to inflation. We've introduced the new disability supplement, which was \$300 per month last year and is now \$308 per month with indexing. We've invested in supportive housing for families, including the Rose in Halifax, which will have space for 24 families and children once it's complete. We've launched the Path Program, which provides up to six years of financial support and otherwise to young people leaving care and heading off into adulthood.

Just yesterday, we announced increases in our individualized funding programs for disability support. That includes direct family support for children, which helps families caring for children with disabilities at home. Parents in that program will see an increase of up to \$800 per month starting this month. That's just a small sample of work happening in the department and across government to make life more affordable for families and to connect children, youth, and families to the services and the support that they need. In the interest of time, I'll wrap it up there. We look forward to your questions today.

THE CHAIR: Are there other members who wish to make . . . okay. We are going to move right into questions. I will remind everyone to please wait until I have identified you and your mic light is active so that we can ensure that comments are audible for the record and for any of those following along on the broadcast. We will start the first round of questions with the NDP caucus under the new format - 20 minutes - followed by the

Liberals for 10 minutes and the PC caucus for 30 minutes. We'll then look at the time that remains, but probably wrapping up questions at about 11:40 a.m.

So, we will begin with questions from the NDP caucus. MLA Hamid.

LINA HAMID: Thank you very much for being here. I really appreciate it. Child poverty is an important topic, so let's go right into it. Can you clarify the reasoning why we're using - and I asked this at Estimates - the Market Basket Measure, why we use that measure as a measure of poverty in Nova Scotia?

THE CHAIR: Is there a particular member? Or if a member of the witnesses can signal so that I can recognize them. Okay. Frazer Egerton, please.

FRAZER EGERTON: MBM is - first and foremost - it's the measure that the federal government has established, so it's the official measure of poverty within Canada. It is also a very accurate measure of poverty. So, as opposed to some other methods, what MBM does is it takes a look at what the actual cost of meeting your basic needs might be, and it does so in a particular area. So, there is one measure within Halifax; there's another area within CBRM; there's another area in more rural areas. So, it looks at how much you pay for rent on average, how much food is in there, how much transportation is, how much clothing is, and then it says, for your household composition - so how many people in your household - this is the rate below which you are unable to meet your basic needs, above which you can meet them. So, it is a very accurate measure of what we understand poverty to be, which is can you meet your most basic needs?

LINA HAMID: The Market Basket Measure, the federal government had started using it a few years ago. They were previously using the after-tax low-income measure, I believe. If we were using that - UNICEF Canada, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, and the European Union all use this measure because it's believed to be more accurate. So, Nova Scotia's rate of child poverty would be significantly higher under this calculation - at 23.8 versus 14 under the Market Basket Measure. So, again, there are actually more accurate ways of measuring poverty out there. I ask if the deputy minister could answer with the rationale behind using the Market Basket Measure versus other, more accurate measures.

CRAIG BEATON: Sure. As Mr. Egerton has outlined, we use the Market Basket Measure because it's the one that is currently federally accepted, so at this time that's the measure we currently use. I don't know if that answers your question or if you have a follow-up question to that.

LINA HAMID: Even using the Market Basket Measure, we've seen a drastic increase in the last two years in terms of, from 2021 to 2022, a single-year increase of 129.5 per cent in poverty in Nova Scotia. This is the largest percentage increase in the country.

Can the department outline what factors - or deputy minister - what factors do you believe caused this rapid increase in child poverty?

CRAIG BEATON: The rise and the increase specifically, as you have indicated, dating back to 2021 - I believe is the time frame you referenced: We do know there was a dramatic drop-off of child poverty as a result of COVID-19 and some of the additional federal rebates. I think of CERB, as an example, which dropped people out of - kind of put them above the threshold for being considered in poverty. When those rebates ended, you saw a dramatic spike back up in terms of individuals who would be below the threshold, and that would be one of the main contributing factors for why you've seen such a jump and increase at that time.

LINA HAMID: Would the tariffs potentially - with the tariffs coming in, we know there's going to be an increase in the cost of living for families. Does the department anticipate an increase - another further increase - in the rates of poverty due to this? If so, will there be any additional supports available for families?

CRAIG BEATON: The word "tariff" and the idea of tariffs is something that has many of us worried. In this sector, many of our service providers and individuals who would be on income assistance, et cetera, are also potentially going to be impacted. We're at a wait-and-see approach right now. It's yet to be determined what the impacts are likely to be. However, I'm sure, as part of the budget process, we're all aware of the additional allocation that's been provided in terms of a contingency fund relating to supporting government interventions relating to impacts as a result of the tariffs.

We'll continue to do our analysis and work with service providers. We'll engage with them, and we'll get feedback. We have continuous feedback from our frontline service providers, not only - and our staff and case workers who would work with individuals on a daily basis, doing proactive case management. We'll hear from the front lines. In preparation for that, we'll plan, if needed, and will bring forward potential recommendations and solutions to the government to ask if further investment is required as a result of the tariffs. At this point it's too early to tell, so we'll wait and see like many other sectors.

LINA HAMID: I did want to quickly jump into where - speaking about frontline workers. I've heard from several family resource centres about the home visits - the Parenting Journey program - that the funding that goes to the frontline workers has certain requirements for the funding, one of them being that the pay for the staff who are giving these visits, who are still providing the service, is not really a living wage. It's quite a bit lower than - as far as I've been told - government staff who would be doing the same work. They had been anticipating an increase three years ago, and during Estimates, I heard that there was an increase from \$70,000 to \$80,000. However, that didn't change how much they could pay the staff member giving the service.

[10:15 a.m.]

This is a question that is quite important to - honestly, I guess all family resource centres. The ones I have spoken with are definitely concerned. I'd love to hear a bit more about - is there an increase? It was a priority last year, but they were told this year it's no longer a priority. Any sort of information around that would be great.

CRAIG BEATON: If you're okay, I can probably start on that, but if you want to get specific details about the family resource centres, I might kick it over to Ms. Embrett, if that's okay.

In terms of the work, I know it was discussed a bit during Estimates debate. The family resource centres are, from my experience and being out visiting a number of them, an exceptional resource for families in need. I've seen first-hand, on a variety of fronts, the work they're able to do in supporting families, not only with food insecurity but also with many of our newcomers.

I think of the North Grove, over in the north end of Dartmouth, which does exceptional work. Last year, the executive director told me they taught over 4,000 families in terms of - I believe that was the number. I may be misspeaking on that, but it was a high number for the amount of money that they're able to provide, so it's an exceptional resource.

We have what are called multi-year service agreements, and we're moving into that in a more concerted effort, so working with individual organizations around what their needs are throughout the year. Staffing would be a component of that. Some of those decisions would be made at the organizational level about where best they would like to prioritize the funding that's provided. There was an increase this year, but if we want to get into more details, if you're okay, I can let Ms. Embrett expand a little further.

THE CHAIR: Ms. Embrett, would you like to add?

TRACY EMBRETT: I would like to echo the deputy minister's statements about family resource centres being the foundation of child and family well-being and community. That is where we want to see supports for families, individuals, and youth start - in community - not with us. We would much prefer that. We've had significant budget increases: \$11 million over a three-year period. This year, we will be doing some expansion to our Youth Outreach program. That was planned. I have been to the Fairview Resource Centre myself. They work incredibly hard, and they are expanding.

It is true that the Parenting Journey program - which is a parenting program that has an assigned support worker in community to work with a family that may be struggling or facing some challenges - we fund it by program not by individual, and there is \$80,000 in

annual funding for the program. That's for the employee; that's for any expenses that go along with that.

We have family resource centres across the province, so there are differing approaches to how that funding is used, but we will continue to look at that. We have a close relationship with all the family resource centres, with reach-ins at any time. I'm open to having conversations if anyone is having difficulty.

LINA HAMID: The family resource centres - I said this at Estimates, but I'll say it every chance I get - they have a special place in my heart.

I'm going to jump back into income assistance rates, if I could. Last year, the annual income assistance rate for a couple with two children was around \$35,000 annually, but the official poverty line for a family of four in Halifax is \$57,000. Why the gap?

CRAIG BEATON: I would start off by saying that income assistance as the social safety net for those who are finding themselves in difficult times is not meant to be a place where we would like people to be staying long term. While the rates, as you have outlined in terms of those two individuals - we have various rates based on whether they're single family or they have housing or not. The rates fluctuate.

The key to it is that we have a number of additional programs that support in behind, whether it's things like rent supplements or rebates for heating assistance. There are a number of programs that we have. A key focus that we have in the department is about trying to provide individuals with the ability to re-enter the workforce. A focus on training, a focus on education and skill development, I think, would be the key. The rates are not at what you would suggest in terms of the poverty line, but I think a number of other pieces go into determining the rates and how government is supporting families more broadly.

LINA HAMID: I think an example of a situation that comes to mind where re-entering the workforce is not even an option is a single mom, three kids, and they had moved here from abroad. The mom didn't speak very much English, didn't have the opportunity to go and learn it because of restrictions on who can take those classes, based on immigration status. Therefore, the kids went to school, but then the eldest child had to drop out to go and get a job because the money they were getting was not sufficient. This is including the fact that one of the children lives with disability. They get extra funding for that. This is a situation where the mom did not have the option to be in the workforce. Therefore, a child had to stop getting an education to provide for the family because the rates aren't enough.

While I appreciate it, we definitely do want to see people with well-paying jobs. There are also folks who are not able to do that. Again, there are folks who are not able to be in the workforce, and the additional programming is just not cutting it. Are there any

increases coming up? I'm sure you hear this all the time. Are there any increases or changes coming up that could support families who are in this type of situation?

CRAIG BEATON: Obviously, we do hear various stories, and I certainly empathize with the situation of that individual that you speak of, which is why I think the implications of increasing income assistance - we did do a small adjustment in the last year, where it increased by 2.5 per cent. I know that's not a huge increase, but every dollar counts when you're a recipient of social benefits. I think indexing income assistance will certainly help, because it's going to tie it to inflation; therefore, it has a big impact on the earning power or the dollar spend of each individual, based on the rates that they're currently receiving.

Equally, I think I said previously that I know not everybody is able to enter the workforce, which is why we've implemented that \$300 disability supplement, which is now \$308. I can tell you from the caseworker feedback that we've had - I think of one individual specifically whom I met with in Antigonish, who was a caseworker for 28 years - they talked about that being the single biggest increase that they've seen for their clients. That affects over 12,000 Nova Scotians who are on income assistance, who may not have the ability to work.

We have some other really great stories: A very similar family to the one that you've outlined, it was a single mother of three. The three children went through a program that we have, that is called Career Rising. That program provides tuition supports for dependants of those who are on income assistance. All three of those individuals graduated from post-secondary education, and they broke the generational cycle. Also, they were inspiring enough to have their mother, who is working, looking after them as children, actually go back to school. Now she is moving off income assistance.

I think there are some really positive stories out there, and our caseworkers do an exceptional job of not only providing the supports that they can, but also the day-to-day case management. They take a very proactive case management approach, and where there are opportunities to support individuals, whether it's with additional supports like that or targeting them into employment or other benefits, they certainly are there for them.

LINA HAMID: I will actually ask a question about the special needs supports. As the deputy minister mentioned, there are a number of areas where income assistance recipients can apply for special needs assistance, including child care.

This might be a question for Tracy Embrett. Can you share how many applications were received last year for child care and how much was spent on that?

CRAIG BEATON: I'll take that. It would be part of our ESIA program and not - Tracy would be the executive director for CFW.

That being said, I actually don't have those statistics. I have statistics on rates and other things that I can give you today, but I don't have that. You know what, we will take it away, and we're happy to provide it back to the committee.

LINA HAMID: The Affordable Living Tax Credit hasn't been - it's indexed to inflation, but the actual rate hasn't been increased. I don't know if we're going to get a chance to get an answer for this question, but can the department explain why the actual rate hasn't gone up aside from inflation?

THE CHAIR: With less time than we get in QP, I would give the floor to Deputy Minister Beaton.

CRAIG BEATON: The Affordable Living Tax Credit is actually administered by the Department of Finance and Treasury Board. I would have to leave it to them to give you a specific answer.

THE CHAIR: MLA Hamid, with 20 seconds.

LINA HAMID: Thank you very much for your time. I appreciate it.

THE CHAIR: We will move on now to questions from the Liberal Party.

MLA Rankin.

HON. IAIN RANKIN: Following on with the discussion on income assistance, because it really is the core program on how we help those who need it the most in the province. I note that the comments that MLA Hamid made around \$35,000 not being enough for families - it is indexed. However, if we are comparatively on the low side, which is my question, we'll never catch up to a wage that I think is acceptable for people to live off, regardless of their circumstances. I understand that we don't want people on income assistance permanently - I don't think anyone would advocate for that - but presumably when you're going into budgets and you're looking at requesting any increases through the Treasury Board, you would have a picture of how we look across the country.

So, I want to ask the question: How does Nova Scotia compare right now with other provinces in the country in terms of what we give for income assistance?

THE CHAIR: Deputy Minister Beaton.

CRAIG BEATON: We actually just had some recent jurisdictional work done on this very question, but we focused on Atlantic Canada. I can talk a little bit about how we fare relating to Atlantic Canada. There are some differences.

In terms of the general income assistance rates - and again, I think I referenced earlier that there are rates for just essentials. There's a basic rate and there's a rate for families. Relative to New Brunswick, if I wanted to look dollar for dollar in terms of the rates, we're actually - I should say, compared to New Brunswick and Newfoundland and Labrador, our rates are marginally higher. We're lower than Prince Edward Island, but Prince Edward Island doesn't have a Nova Scotia Child Benefit. When you factor in those - we didn't actually do the analysis to see, if you factor in the child benefit, where it all sits. But in terms of rate for rate, relative to New Brunswick and Newfoundland and Labrador, our rates are slightly higher.

I can give you the exact numbers. I just have to look for them in the binder.

IAIN RANKIN: Just tabling that would be helpful.

[10:30 a.m.]

Given that we are discussing the benefits of having a number of programs that fill the gaps - not just income assistance - why aren't we - or maybe we are - indexing those programs that you're mentioning, in terms of having the child benefit, Heating Assistance Rebate Program, and the basket of programs? If the intention is to ensure everything is being attached to the cost of living, and our strength is - if we're comparing to other jurisdictions - that we have a host of programs, are we indexing those to make sure we are keeping up with the cost increases that the most vulnerable are facing?

CRAIG BEATON: In terms of some of the other programs, one of the things I had referenced in my opening comments was around affordability as a government response. OSD has a role to play in that, in terms of supporting those who find themselves in difficult situations around hard times - some of society's most vulnerable.

Broader than that, affordability affects all Nova Scotians. When we look at some of the initiatives that government has under way, in terms of reduction of the HST, which will take effect today, it's a \$500 million announcement they had made during government. We have increasing income tax thresholds. The School Lunch Program - which hopefully we'll have an opportunity to talk about because our department did play a role in that with the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development - there are a number of pieces that fall into how we affect and support affordability.

In terms of indexing - your direct question around indexing some of those programs - we have conversations with our government colleagues around how we address broader affordability for Nova Scotians. We play a role in that. In terms of indexing particular programs, those would be things we wouldn't necessarily have control over at OSD but would engage with our partners and other departments on those conversations.

IAIN RANKIN: Relative to a potential recession that we may face, the mention of tariffs, and the impact to the economy, would the department agree - and this is what I've come to understand through experts in the field - that the funding that government gives to the most vulnerable, especially income assistance but the other programs, too, basically gets spent? If we do face a recession, would the department agree that the most effective way to put government money into the economy, therefore to stimulate the economy, is to increase all these supports for the most vulnerable families? Would the department endeavour to request increases to these programs, if we do hit the recession that many think is coming?

CRAIG BEATON: There's some speculation in there about whether we would hit a recession. I can't say what would happen if; I think we would address it at that time.

I think of how government responded during COVID-19, and it was an all-of-government approach. Should we find ourselves in the situation where tariffs have an impact and put the economy into a recession, we would certainly play a role in that, in terms of advising government on how best we could support Nova Scotians, particularly those who are most vulnerable. I am sure OSD would be part of the rollout of that plan.

IAIN RANKIN: I'm glad you mentioned COVID because one of the things we did during that time was look at the gaps in terms of food. Since that time, we have food pantries set up across the province. I have one that I literally helped set up at my office. Every single evening that I'm at my office, people are coming in. They tend to come in the evening, so they avoid the stigma of being seen. It's a big problem.

We did have one-time funding go to various groups across the province. I'm wondering - even if we don't have the recession, this is a problem now. I know we fund Feed Nova Scotia, but that funding does not end up with these organizations that do such great work. Some of them are expanding to community fridges so we have perishable items and such, but we need a lot more support.

I ask the question because the demand is, by far, outstripping the supply, at least in the Timberlea area, and I can expect in various other areas - I know in Cole Harbour and in some other places I visited.

Given that what we're facing is even more extreme than what we saw during the pandemic, in terms of food insecurity, will the department entertain looking at some at least one-time funding? Obviously, recurring funding would be great, but some one-time funding for these various community organizations that are having a challenge keeping up with the demand.

CRAIG BEATON: Food insecurity, you're right, is a very salient topic right now that affects a lot of Nova Scotians. You mentioned the increase to Feed Nova Scotia. The other groups that we work with are the collaborative food networks as well. Food

insecurity is not necessarily just the Department of Opportunities and Social Development, although we do play a role in that. We also partner with our colleagues over at CCTH. They work with various organizations including Nourish Nova Scotia. The Department of Agriculture also plays a role in this space. There is a variety of programs that individuals and organizations can apply to to help address food insecurity.

We hear from our service providers, and we do know, as I think I mentioned earlier, as part of our multi-year service agreements that we have with them, there is a bit of back and forth with our organizations around what their needs are for the coming years. Obviously, with inflation and other things, it's no secret to see that the budget requests for food, in particular, have increased across most of the organizations that we support and that we work with - groups like family resource centres and others that are doing work in community.

When there's an opportunity for groups to be able to submit proposals to the department, we certainly would look at those. Where we have budget capacity to support them, we certainly bring recommendations forward to the minister to be able to consider those.

IAIN RANKIN: You mentioned HST has decreased. However, families are still paying tax on car seats. I know that because I purchase car seats now. I'm at that time in my life. They cost \$500 or \$600 for a good one. What I'm seeing is that families who don't have the means are actually buying used ones that could be expired. Ontario exempts the provincial part of HST. I'm just wondering if you would advocate to take the tax off car seats for families in Nova Scotia.

CRAIG BEATON: I think we would obviously entertain discussion about it first. We have not had any requests to that extent that I'm aware of, but if people had requests, it's something that we would look at and do some analysis on it and bring forward to government with recommendations.

THE CHAIR: The time has elapsed for the Liberal Party. We will move on to questions from the PC Party.

First, we have an arrival. I would ask my former seatmate to please introduce himself.

MLA Wong.

HON. BRIAN WONG: My apologies for being late. I am Brian Wong, MLA for Waverley-Fall River-Beaver Bank.

THE CHAIR: Thank you, MLA Wong.

MLA MacQuarrie.

KYLE MACQUARRIE: We understand that there have been a lot of media coverage and announcements coming from your department, which cover the vast work being done across your many programs and initiatives. We want to ensure that we are using our time in this committee to inform the public clearly and concisely of all that is available to those in need of support. I will start by being clear that many of our questions today will be intended to give you a platform to speak to these measures. We really appreciate it.

Can you tell me about the changes you have made to income assistance over the past few years?

CRAIG BEATON: I spoke to a few of these earlier, but I'm happy to sort of go into a bit more depth on them. In terms of income assistance, we currently support about 37,000 Nova Scotians who are currently on income assistance, roughly about 3 per cent of the population, around 24,000 households as well. It's a significant number of individuals.

I think I mentioned earlier that we have increased income assistance in the last year by 2.5 per cent. There has also been an indexing of income assistance, which I think is probably the biggest benefit that we'll see. In addition to that, we've had the disability supplement that's been provided. That was a \$300 increase. I've also mentioned that.

We increased school supplies last year on supplies for individuals who were on income assistance. There was \$100 for youth entering into elementary school, and it was \$200 for junior high and high school. That was a benefit that we provided in August of last year leading into school, recognizing the cost of school supplies and the impact of that.

I also mentioned a disability supplement. For those 12,000 Nova Scotians who receive that \$300 - there was also a one-time payment to those who were not eligible for that supplement of \$150, so there was an additional investment that was provided to folks on income assistance.

The other piece I think is really important is we've also increased the amount of earnings that individuals can receive before there is any impact on their eligibility in terms of what they're eligible for for income assistance. That amount increased by \$100 and is now up to \$350 per month that individuals can earn while on income assistance without having an impact on the benefits that they receive.

KYLE MACQUARRIE: We understand that there are programs that assist recipients of income assistance to transition to employment. Can you share a little bit about these programs and whom they support?

CRAIG BEATON: There is a variety of programs that we have. ESIA - Employment Support and Income Assistance - has two divisions. There's an Income

Assistance division that predominantly has caseworkers who work directly in support of providing supports to individuals who are on income assistance. In addition to that, we have Employment Support Services - ESS, which is a separate division in conjunction with ESIA.

Their work is primarily about breaking down the barriers associated with re-entry into employment. That could be things like resumé writing. It could be the purchasing of equipment to be able to enter into the workforce. It could be upskilling. It could be education. There are a variety of tools that we would have, and a variety of programs that individuals who would be on the income assistance caseload would be eligible to enter into. That navigation is really done in conjunction with their caseworkers.

We have a variety of programs as well for youth to really break that generational cycle. What we do know is that there are a number of factors that contribute to poverty. Access to education is one of those. We do know that there is also the ability for individuals to have secure employment, and to be able to be in that employment is also a barrier. We do have a significant focus on the generational impacts of those.

One of the biggest predictors of somebody ending up on income assistance is actually whether or not their parents were on income assistance. It's roughly about 14 per cent of individuals who are on income assistance who were a child of somebody who had been on the caseload previously. A lot of our work is preventing that from happening and breaking that cycle, particularly. So we have a number of youth-related programs that impact those - programs like EDGE, programs like the Path Program. I spoke a little bit to a previous question around Career Rising, where we can support the cost of tuition, partial tuition, books - but also allow those who are young on the caseload, 18 or over, to be able to go back to school and to keep some of their benefits while they're doing their education, whether it's in a private career college, NSCC, or in university.

KYLE MACQUARRIE: That was such a good answer that you also answered my next question, which was about breaking the cycle of dependency on income assistance.

I'll pass on the floor to my colleague.

THE CHAIR: MLA Timmins.

DIANNE TIMMINS: Thank you for coming. I do recognize the family that MLA Hamid had mentioned. My family, when I was young, grew up in a low-income family and basically relied on Community Services. I admire the changes that happened over the years, for sure. My father, again, had a disability, and my mother had eight children, so we struggled. We struggled and all of our family - the children - had to work to help support the family. We grew up on a hobby farm, so thank goodness our food security was there.

[10:45 a.m.]

Basically, over the years I've seen much change. I was able to go to school. I was blessed with hard-working parents who showed us what hard work was about living on a farm. I was able to get my education. I was a young single mom. My husband and I basically said to ourselves, we're going to work harder and break the cycle, and we were fortunate enough to do that. There are many families who don't, and my goal over the years was to support the families who were, because I worked in community development.

I worked in those service providers that looked for funding to help break cycles and support families. I also worked in an MLA's office and so I admire the changes that happened. There were some gaps. Certainly, we worked within the MLA's office to try to build with service providers and connect the dots between Community Services clients and the workforce as well. I admire the changes that happened over the years, and I'm very excited to hear about pathways as well. I know they've changed it in different formats over the years.

With families being in disability, you've changed the support systems. Can you talk a little bit more about the programs that you support within the system for bridging those gaps and also to support the people with disabilities? I know you did talk a little bit about it, but if you can just mention some of the programs that are existing within the rural areas.

THE CHAIR: Deputy Minister Beaton.

CRAIG BEATON: Can I just ask for one point of clarity? Are you referring to the employment-specific programs or disability programs or both?

DIANNE TIMMINS: Let's work with bridging program for the work programs that you are introducing to people who are on community services.

CRAIG BEATON: Sure. I think one that you may be referring to is the Path Program. The Path Program is financial support that we provide for youth who are exiting care and custody of the minister. That program provides ongoing support for daily living costs. Tracy will have the exact numbers, but I believe it is for up to six years. They are provided income to be able to transition into stability and into employment for those six years as they move off, as well as education programs, but I might ask Tracy to maybe talk a little bit.

THE CHAIR: Ms. Embrett, please.

TRACY EMBRETT: The Path Program is a program that was initiated and rolled out in January 2024. It is a program that focuses on concrete supports in funding, as well as supports through Family Service Nova Scotia. It is for youth in care who have reached the age of majority - either 19 or 21. It's also for youth who have been enrolled in a voluntary

youth services agreement. These would be youth for whom there has been a substantiated risk; they cannot live safely with their parent or guardian, but they are between the ages of 16 and 18, up until their 19th birthday. Children at that age are not brought into care of the minister, but definitely there is a noted and identified need for support at that time and going forward.

When we talk specifically about affordability, challenge, and being successful, the resources and foundations that some of these young people have may not be the same as someone who has grown up with their family, who may be 24, and still living at home. This program has been very successful to date in supporting youth with an income. It is essentially an income of \$20,000 per year at the age of 19, and there is a decline of \$2,000 a year until the youth turns 26.

It is voluntary; it's not required. If a young person does not want to participate in the program, that's their choice. The funding is provided bi-weekly and there are regular check-ins. That is a caveat to the program - that there are regular check-ins with Family Service Nova Scotia, which is a wonderful provincial service provider that supports a lot of our prevention programs as well.

The supports there could be anything. It could be budgeting support. It could be support to help find a job. It could be somebody to help navigate relationships and decision-making as these young people are navigating adulthood, just like every one of us did when we turned 19. It's a very helpful resource for them. They still have a connection to their assigned social worker as well, or a social worker with the department. There's even a 24/7 hotline or telephone line specifically for these youth. It really does extend that care and support beyond 19. In years previous when a young person in care turned 19 or 21, sometimes their only option was income assistance.

We also support youth post care in a post-care and custody agreement if they are pursuing post-secondary education, whether it's training for a trade or any other formal post-secondary. It could be a dog grooming course. It could be whatever they choose to do. The post-care agreement would support living expenses during the time that the person is pursuing their education goals, and the Path Program funding and support is available in addition to that. It's not means-tested or needs-tested - it is automatic to anyone who enrolls with it.

DIANNE TIMMINS: I'm going to change the subject to foster care, if you don't mind. We heard a lot about the Mockingbird Family model. I do believe it started in Cape Breton - you may correct me on that. If you could talk a little bit about it and how it is moving forward to assist foster parents.

TRACY EMBRETT: I'd love to talk about it. The Mockingbird Family model of service delivery has been adopted by the Department of Opportunities and Social Development as a foster care redesign. We began with a one-year pilot in Cape Breton in a

rural setting in Marion Bridge. We had an experienced foster caregiver who was willing to do the trial with us. We also had a second, more urban constellation in the Preston townships area with a very experienced and respected foster caregiver.

The Mockingbird Family approach looks at - we shifted from foster caregivers needing to use their own money, submit receipts and get reimbursed for expenses for caring for children, to paying them a biweekly amount, based on the assessed needs of the children, in a block funding manner, if you will, so that foster caregivers could plan. If they are planning for a vacation or if they want to register the child in care whom they are caring for in their home for basketball or hockey or ballet or art classes, they have that funding to do that.

The other important piece around the Mockingbird Family approach is that we do have foster caregivers in constellations. It's a constellation or gathering, if you will, of six to 10 foster caregivers with a lead hub home. The intention of that is to emulate what an extended family looks like.

It's been incredibly successful. We still need foster caregivers. We need to have more foster caregivers than we have children in care, in order to make sure that we keep children in their home community, in their own school and close to their parents. When a child is in care, our goal is family reunification until it absolutely cannot be.

Just a couple success stories: We've had one constellation go on a family Summer vacation together. They did T-shirts, and they went on a camping trip together as an entire family.

Another success story: Unfortunately, sometimes there may be a breakdown in a placement in a home, and there have been a number of locations where there was a breakdown in a placement. However, the child was able to stay in the same constellation. It wasn't a broken relationship. It was a break - a break for the foster care giver, maybe a break for the child - but there was no loss of connection to the community that child felt part of.

If there is time, I will also share another success story, and that was when there was a medical emergency with a foster caregiver. A few years ago, those children may have been picked up by a social worker and transferred to an emergency foster placement anywhere else in Nova Scotia. In this situation, the foster caregiver called 911, and then they called the hub home. The hub home said, Don't you worry; you put the knapsacks on the front steps, and we'll go pick up the boys from school. They knew who was coming to get them. They were able to support that when the youth were scared. There was a hospital stay, and they were able to keep the youth in the hub home in the community, go to the hospital for visits until all was well, and return home with their foster caregivers.

Less disruption for children and an increase in funding for foster caregivers ensures the children in the care of the minister have the exact same opportunities that any of our children do.

DIANNE TIMMINS: I appreciate what Mockingbird Family is doing for the community.

I have one other question regarding housing. There has been a lot of work done around housing support. Can you share a bit about what is going on? I know that in Cape Breton, the community Housing First had the 35 Pallet shelter homes. Basically, it's near the - I'm sure you know enough about it. I'm wondering about the connection between Housing First and the support the department provides for individuals who were homeless and who would go into these homes and the support that will be provided for them because of this.

CRAIG BEATON: I think you're referring to some of the work we've done around supportive housing, which we believe is also a measure toward supporting individuals with affordability.

We have one element of housing within our department, and it predominantly focuses on homelessness and the prevention of homelessness, but in doing so, we're part of the continuum of supporting the supply within housing. Part of that is supportive housing, so we do have a supportive housing action plan. That plan was developed three years ago with the intention of creating an additional 1,085 units. We're a year ahead of schedule on that.

Within that you would see things like the 70 tiny homes that we've had completed in Sackville, Nova Scotia, which give people their own space and a place to call home. We also have the 200 shelter village sites - the ones that you refer to in Sydney. Those have also been completed. The impact on that has been significant in terms of the number of people whom we've been able to support off what is called the By Name List, where people who are precariously housed go, indicating that they need housing.

We also, as part of supportive housing, work with a number of service providers to be able to support individuals who are on the cusp of being what we would call unhoused. There are ways that's done through service providers, through one-time supports, to be able to give them support toward their rent, potentially. Diversion funding is typically the way we approach that. We've invested about \$12 million in the last year to be able to support diversion funding because the best way to prevent homelessness is to keep people housed. That is one of the areas where we've invested a lot of time, and the team has done tremendous work to be able to support that.

[11:00 a.m.]

Those diversion supports can also support service providers being able to provide first month's rent, as an example, or damage deposit. These are other avenues that we think address the affordability for individuals who are seeking housing as one of the key barriers for them in terms of affordability. Government also has this fairly significant rent supplement program that they've advanced, and in terms of housing also, a very sizable investment in public housing this last year of \$1.5 billion to increase the continuum.

In terms of the work that we're doing around homelessness, we can tell you that that supply that's going on has certainly significantly impacted our work in terms of making sure that individuals in communities are getting adequate housing. Working with the service providers, they're able to navigate and determine who is best suited, so we have a whole range of housing supply now that we think meets the needs of individuals where they currently are.

THE CHAIR: If I understand correctly, that was the final question.

MLA Stoilov.

DAMIAN STOILOV: Thank you all, by the way. I just want to say that you've answered every question with such detail, and you've probably answered a couple of my questions a little bit, but nonetheless, let's elaborate on a couple of them. Regarding income assistance, I think Deputy Minister Beaton touched on a bit with the Nova Scotia Child Benefit, which is used to support low-income families. Can you elaborate a little bit more about that how that works in a little bit more detail?

THE CHAIR: Mr. Egerton.

FRAZER EGERTON: The Nova Scotia Child Benefit is a monthly benefit that is provided through the taxation system, so it's a very efficient delivery. It affords Nova Scotians who have a child in a household with an amount that starts at \$1,525 for your first child. It provides that to you on a monthly basis. It actually helps support just shy of 40,000 children in any given year. That's about 22,000 households.

It comes at a cost of around \$54 million in 2024-25. I was going to say to date, but 2024-25 is now done, so \$54 million for the last tax year. It works by giving an amount of \$1,525 for households up to a \$26,000 threshold for each child that they have. For those who are in households of between \$26,000 and \$34,000, there's a slightly diminished level for your second and third children in those households.

It is very efficient. The administrative burden on that is very slight because it's delivered through the taxation system. The only eligibility is your income, if you have a child, and if you've filed taxes the year before. The rest is an automated system.

The one other thing I would add is that if you are eligible for the Nova Scotia Child Benefit, you are automatically eligible for the pharmacare program for your children, which affords you pharmacare for a \$5 copay per use. That is obviously a significant benefit for those who may be requiring pharmacare in any given year.

DAMIAN STOILOV: I heard especially at election time - it came up almost at every door - I can tell you that most families I spoke to at the door were liking the Nova Scotia School Lunch Program. It's really gone over well. I just want to know if you can maybe let us know a little bit more about your department and how you work with the School Lunch Program, and anything that might be happening in the future on bringing more schools on board.

THE CHAIR: Deputy Minister Beaton.

CRAIG BEATON: I think maybe I can start. Nicole has been one of our leads on the implementation of the School Lunch Program in conjunction with the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development. I would let her maybe give you a bit more detail.

When you talk about affordability and the impact on families, having every child being able to have a healthy, nutritious lunch has a significant impact on education outcomes and their overall health and well-being. School lunch is much broader than providing a nutritious lunch. It's also about addressing what we would say are those underlying social determinants of health.

In terms of the client base that we're supporting, we do know that food insecurity does have a big impact. Our role in devising that was to ensure the lens from OSD was included in how our clients would be benefactors of the school lunch program.

In terms of the details of how it works and how it rolls out, as well as the evaluation, I would ask Nicole to give you a bit more information on that.

THE CHAIR: Ms. Hazlehurst.

NICOLE HAZLEHURST: Can everyone hear me? Okay.

Last year, we worked with a team from across government, including the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development and the Department of Health and Wellness, to design and implement the Nova Scotia School Lunch Program. The program itself was implemented in October 2024, and it follows a pay-what-you-can model to ensure all students have access to nutritious meals without financial barriers. Families can contribute up to \$6.50 per lunch, a portion of that, or nothing. Payments are made confidentially through an online ordering system to protect privacy. Families don't have to explain or prove why they've chosen to pay the amount they've selected.

The first phase of the School Lunch Program included 258 schools across the province. That reaches about 75,000 students. It operates alongside other school food initiatives like the free breakfast program. This ensures students have consistent access to nutritious meals throughout the school day.

The program itself offers a rotating menu of 40 lunches. Students have access to two options every day. For the menu itself, we worked with chefs and dietitians to design it to make sure all the meals are nutritious and so we could offer students a mix of those familiar favourites like cheese pizza with a side of vegetables but also some of those new flavours, as well.

Earlier this year, you may have heard the program had an important milestone of two million lunches served, which is absolutely incredible. We continue to support our colleagues at Education and Early Childhood Development with the ongoing monitoring and evaluation of the program.

THE CHAIR: I'm sorry. That does fill this particular time period. I personally regret having to interrupt on that particular topic.

We do have about 30 minutes left in questioning. We will divide that evenly between the Opposition parties and the government party, beginning with the Opposition parties with 15 minutes.

MLA Hansen.

SUZY HANSEN: I'm going to go back to child poverty because I think we need to get grounded in the reasoning why folks access the services they do. We know that over 40 per cent of Nova Scotian children live in poverty. Poverty rates are particularly high in Digby, Annapolis, Cape Breton, and Queens.

My question to the department is: Do you have updated data on how many Nova Scotian children live in food-insecure households, and are you tracking communities based on their various backgrounds?

My second part is: What is the department's poverty elimination plan, including targets and timelines to end child poverty?

THE CHAIR: Deputy Minister Beaton.

CRAIG BEATON: I wanted to make sure I didn't miss both of your questions.

In terms of tracking data, we have robust data within our department. We do look at a variety of different inputs in terms of how we're measuring, which is why - one of the reasons for the indexing of the income assistance would have come from our looking at the

data and what the impacts are of the Consumer Price Indexing not necessarily keeping rate with inflation for our particular program in question.

In terms of the backgrounds, maybe I'll get you to repeat that - sorry, I was focused on the timeline question - if you don't mind?

SUZY HANSEN: Obviously, the data is being collected. I was just wondering: Are you also tracking those communities with the various backgrounds - desegregated data based on where they're from, culture, all of those pieces.

CRAIG BEATON: Sorry for not having that right off the bat. We do have a breakdown based on communities that would be receiving income assistance. We do it based on region, so we would have four regions in the province - Northern, Western, Central and Eastern Zones.

In terms of aggregated data based on breakdown of certain barriers - whether it's related to race or gender, sexual orientation, et cetera - a lot of that is done through our race-based data collection process that's happening broadly across government, so we wouldn't necessarily have the exact breakdown in terms of various communities right now. That initiative is still developing. Not every applicant or intake process that we have do we require self-identification, so it's really hard to get to some of those pieces.

The points you make, some of the things we look at when it comes to child poverty - and I think I referenced some of this earlier - are ensuring that we do have awareness around some of the factors that influence poverty, which is access to stable and ongoing employment, access to education.

We do know there are structural and historical barriers faced by discrimination on certain groups, as well as intergenerational factors. A variety of our programs do look to address those issues as they relate to supporting individuals being more self-sufficient.

SUZY HANSEN: The programs are amazing. There are a number of initiatives across the province that are happening in community through resource centres and other supports. We applaud those things because we know they are needed.

A lot of times, we see there are gaps, e.g. when we're talking about financial numbers for folks who are living in poverty. I say these things because there are a number of issues that we see across departments. It's good to hear that there are some collaborations in departments, working together to get things done.

I really hope your department is advocating for more funding to be able to close that gap. We know that as time goes along, we get further and further away from where we need to be, to make sure that people are in a safe space and a safe place.

I'm going to shift to homelessness because that was talked about earlier - about some of the programs when it comes to homelessness or at risk of losing housing. Families living below the poverty line are at risk of homelessness. I know folks see it all the time. Can you tell us how many families are currently homeless that you work with or that you are aware of, that you work with in your department?

CRAIG BEATON: I actually didn't get to your previous question about the timeline, so I don't know if you want me to go back to that or if you just want me to move on.

SUZY HANSEN: I would love a timeline. You go ahead. I jumped the gun.

CRAIG BEATON: Sorry, I should have managed expectations because I don't actually have a timeline to give you. (Laughter) What I can say is that obviously timelines, in terms of an overall report in terms of how we address affordability, I think I would go back to some of the work that we've been able to achieve in the last year. A lot of it has been at the hands of doing things cross-departmentally.

[11:15 a.m.]

I don't want to underscore the impacts that we've had in terms of our department - indexing and some of those other pieces to address that - but also the employment supports. I think even more are some of the investments we've seen corporately, which we do know have a direct impact on our clients. I think I referenced earlier that affordability crosses all departments, including the department of Finance and Treasury Board. Those increases on basic income tax thresholds, and the other increases we've seen around rent supplement programs and public housing all have a direct impact.

I think what I wanted to do was to make sure that you knew we're working in tandem with our other departments and really focusing on action, and not necessarily on direct time. We know that we're not going to dig out of this quickly. It is a continuum. I think the supports we have in place and trying to prevent it from happening in the first place is really the focus of the department right now.

On to your second piece around homelessness. I think there - I don't have the number off the top of my head in terms of how many families. I do know the number of individuals, as part of those family groups, is roughly around 200. We've talked a lot about - you probably have heard in the past, in Estimates - the minister was quite excited about the Rose, and rightfully so, because those types of impacts do break the generational cycle of poverty when you can have people who are housed securely and not living in hotels.

The number isn't around, but we will get the number for you. I think it's around 80 families we're currently working with that are what we would call homeless right now. The team has done exceptional work, listening to our service providers. They're the ones who

are on the front lines and giving us a lot of impact, which is - the Rose, to me, is such a huge success story, not only because of the impact that it's going to have with families but the timeline. It was essentially a concept 10 months ago, and now we have people who have moved in there.

That's not all government's work, although government moved quickly with our colleagues at the Department of Public Works to be able to make that space available, but the service provider quickly went in there and was able to have that. We're going to have 24 families that are going to be in that unit. There are also 30 families that have been supported in Dartmouth, as well, through another program. The department has done an exceptional job, I believe, in terms of trying to address the needs of families and get kids and families out of hotels.

I've only been there 10 months, so I can take very little credit for that. A lot of it is the work of the team prior to, but it's been exceptional to see - and the impact it has on families and youth as they're able to find secure housing.

SUZY HANSEN: I'm glad to see the urgency because 10 months in and all these things are happening because we know there's a need for that. I'm glad to see that's working and we're working with service providers across the province.

It was mentioned - the diversion program to help keep families in their homes. Can you tell me how many families received funding to help with overdue power bills, rental arrears, or barriers maintaining housing? Is there a number or an amount that you've been able to allocate for that program?

CRAIG BEATON: Sure. I do have some information on that in particular. In terms of diversion support, I don't know the exact amount, but through the program funding we were able to provide to service providers, it would have been estimated that we prevented more than 1,000 Nova Scotians from becoming unsheltered in the last year as a result of that investment.

SUZY HANSEN: I'm grateful for that. We make those calls all the time.

The Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives' Nova Scotia office has argued that strengthening tenant protections and tying rent control to the unit to close the fixed-term lease loophole would help protect the tenant and keep folks in affordable housing - and the children's right to stable the housing.

I'm wondering: As we advocate for multiple things across departments, is this something that folks in your department are advocating for, as well, when it comes to tenancy protections?

CRAIG BEATON: We work quite closely with the Department of Growth and Development, which has the housing portfolio that was previously with the Department of Municipal Affairs and Housing. I know our teams talk a lot about what's the best way to do prevention. I can't speak specifically to what you're asking in terms of that question, but our teams are pretty much joined at the hip in terms of supporting because a lot of our service providers also work with the Department of Growth and Development around the rent supplement program that's administered by them.

Through their collective work, they look at a variety of policy measures to ensure people stay housed or to be able to adequately build the supply, which I think I referenced earlier.

SUZY HANSEN: I'm going to pass it to my colleague.

THE CHAIR: MLA Hamid.

LINA HAMID: I recently came across a report that was done in B.C. that compared the funding that families who are fostering receive versus families through kinship care receive. There seems to be quite a big gap there. I'm wondering - I haven't done the digging yet; I just saw that yesterday. Do we have any sort of information about where that is in Nova Scotia? Do we have a gap? If so, what are we planning to do to close it?

THE CHAIR: Ms. Embrett.

TRACY EMBRETT: When we shifted to block funding for foster care and foster caregivers, inclusive in the foster caregiver group is kinship caregivers who historically have been a close connection through a relative or have a pre-existing relationship with the child.

After the development of the kinship foster caregiving category, if you will, we also rolled out a new program a few years ago called Alternative Family Care. When a child is placed in a foster home, they are a child in the care of the minister. In order to not need to bring children into care, we developed the Alternative Family Care program. When there is a child or a family where there's a risk that the child may need to be brought into care for their safety, we will work with the family to see if there's someone in that family circle, someone who loves that child and will care for that child, so that there is not a need to bring that little one or youth into care. We have recently increased the monthly amount from \$250 a month to \$750 a month per child for the Alternative Family Care. It is less than what a foster caregiver would receive, and we are looking at that.

LINA HAMID: Thank you very much for that - I appreciate it. I guess we'll touch on this quickly because this might be several departments. In the most recent budget, it was estimated that the changes to HST, the basic personal amount, the bracket indexation

would save families about \$1,000 a year. Would you know roughly how much a family earning income assistance will save as a result of these measures?

CRAIG BEATON: We would have to do the math on that because every situation would be different. I think generally, \$1,000 per year is also what we've been kind of working with. It all depends on what tax bracket they would be in and a number of factors. We would have to do the math and report back.

LINA HAMID: Thank you all very much for your time today. I really appreciate it. I don't think I can squeeze another question in. Thank you so much.

THE CHAIR: That does cause the time for Opposition questions to elapse, so we will move to the PC Party.

MLA MacQuarrie.

KYLE MACQUARRIE: How do you ensure that programs aimed at reducing financial barriers for children and families are fair and equitable, considering the varying needs of different communities such as our rural communities?

THE CHAIR: Ms. Embrett.

TRACY EMBRETT: We now have 28 family resource centres, which go from one end of the province to the other. We have about 80 programs in total that we fund and support through prevention and early intervention, definitely with a focus on rural as well. We want to ensure that there are no gaps in services and supports for families.

I'll take this opportunity, as well, to share that as our increases in prevention and early intervention programming - which range not just around resource centres - we have parenting programs, the Strengthening Fathers program, which are grassroots community programming to address the needs of and support father figures, men, and boys prior to something happening that may result in violence. We have youth outreach programs and Families Plus programming, and the focus through prevention and early intervention is to address all the geographical needs, as well.

We have been - I missed the opportunity in a previous question to highlight that the numbers of children in care are continuing to slowly decline in Nova Scotia, which is wonderful. We are also seeing the numbers for Alternative Family Care - which I referenced previously - those numbers are down over the last year, as well. We know our engagement numbers with our prevention and early intervention service providers across the province are increasing, which is wonderful news. We want to support children, families, and individuals in their communities, where they're at, long before there needs to be any more intrusive or formal involvement with the department.

THE CHAIR: MLA Stoilov.

DAMIAN STOILOV: I thought it would be right, before we asked more questions, that I would ask Nicole Hazlehurst if she wanted to finish what she started before we ran out of time on the Nova Scotia School Lunch Program.

THE CHAIR: Ms. Hazlehurst.

NICOLE HAZLEHURST: I was going to add further to what Deputy Minister Beaton had said around how the School Lunch Program is a significant step in addressing food insecurity among children, as well as supporting their academic success and overall well-being. When kids are hungry, it's hard for them to learn. We know healthy food at school supports their learning behaviour and overall well-being. This program is an example of how our department is working collaboratively across government to address affordability and reduce financial barriers for Nova Scotians.

THE CHAIR: MLA Wong.

HON. BRIAN WONG: Thank you for what you do. It is one of the most important things we can do, to help families along and try to make them successful. My career was around education. I probably spent half my career as a teacher and half as a principal at all levels. Food insecurity was big, so I appreciate that.

Transitioning, as well - transitioning out of school, whether you transition as a graduate or transition before you graduate and then on to post-secondary for some or directly into the workforce. It's big, and it's important, and that's why work-integrated learning is a focus right now, because we want youth to try things out. It also gives them the opportunity to try different types of jobs, and it gives the employer a chance to help that student or that youth transition themselves and help guide them. Relationships are key.

That brings me to the EDGE program. I think that goes to E.D. Embrett to talk about the EDGE program and how to support youth in transitioning successfully into the workplace.

THE CHAIR: Ms. Embrett.

TRACY EMBRETT: I think the deputy minister is going to respond to this question.

THE CHAIR: Sorry about that. (Laughter) Deputy Minister Beaton.

CRAIG BEATON: The EDGE program started out a number of years ago, back in 2018, as a pilot. In 2023, we put the program in permanently. It is a great program that can help youth transition to employment. It does provide intensive, on-the-job supports and

training for youth who are looking to enter into employment, exiting income assistance. It is a program we offer that supports youth who are aged 18 to 26.

It's interesting to see some of the stats we've had from the EDGE program: 40 per cent of those who enter into the EDGE program are finding employment within six months and staying in that employment. Typically, they have employment for mostly full-time work. The focus on early prevention, of getting youth into employment who are off income assistance has been a real focus for us.

[11:30 a.m.]

The budget, in fact, for employment supports doubled in the last number of years from \$9 million to \$18 million. We know that just over 20 per cent of income assistance recipients are currently participating in our employment support programs. It was referenced earlier that not all are able to find their way into employment supports, but we think that we can build on that. That is going to be a significant focus for our department. We continue to work on that, which is increasing the number of folks who are accessing our employment support programs, to really find them the opportunities to make their way back into the workforce. Currently right now within that, we have about 22 per cent of the people whom we are working with exiting every month into employment. The EDGE program has been a significant contributor toward that.

THE CHAIR: MLA Wong, do you have a follow-up?

BRIAN WONG: Yes, I do. I'm just wondering what the stats would look like in HRM compared to the rest of Nova Scotia to see the success with a number. I know there's going to be a higher number here, but percentage-wise, is there more participation in certain areas of the province?

CRAIG BEATON: I do have some breakdown of some stats and participation in the EDGE program, which I can refer to here. Between 2021 and 2024, we had 530 individuals participate in EDGE. Again, it's a select group, but it is about breaking that generational cycle of dependence on income assistance. Two hundred and forty-nine of those were income assistance; 172 completed the EDGE program within six months. A survey found that 75 per cent of those who participated really felt that the program absolutely improved their communication and job-related skills and increased their confidence in work.

We do have service providers who offer the EDGE program on our behalf. A couple of examples would be in north end Halifax - shows you a bit of the growth of where the programs come in terms of awareness and also our case management and our income assistance workers referring folks through to EDGE. But in north end Halifax, where we had three participants in 2021, this year we had over 43 participants in that program, which

is a significant growth in terms of the participation and the success. In Cape Breton, there were 13 participants in 2021, and this year there were 58 as of November.

In terms of the actual regional breakdown, I don't have that on hand, but those are the stats that I think do speak to some of the growth and the awareness. I think it would be equal growth across the province. All our service providers that have this program do a great job of trying to reach the youth who would be eligible to apply for this program and be part of it.

BRIAN WONG: It sounds like it's a great program. As educators, once kids leave our schools, we lose track of them for the most part. Some you hear through the grapevine. It's nice to see those programs that are available, so kudos to you.

On the other end of the spectrum is the early intervention program. I did notice that there's an increase in budget. I just wonder if one of you could speak about the early intervention program.

THE CHAIR: This time I'll get it right. Ms. Embrett, please.

TRACY EMBRETT: Our annual budget did have a three-year investment that began in 2021 - an increase of \$11 million. We had an additional investment of \$9.3 million in 2023-24, and that was around the implementation of the Path Program.

Often when individuals hear about prevention and early intervention, your thoughts may go to the early years, but our prevention and early intervention programs are early. They're through the teen years and they're post as well, so our youth outreach programs - the PATH program goes up until - eligibility is up until the 26th birthday. We really look at having prevention and early intervention complement any involvement that we have or don't have - complementing our involvement with youth in care or complementing a community. We just hear the good stories that our service providers are able to support the families.

I have some data that I can refer to. The approximate number of families supported by family resources and the Parenting Journey programs in 2023-24 was 8,300.

The Youth Outreach Plus program has served over 110 youths since its implementation. Youth Outreach programs have supported 1,600 youth in one year.

Strengthening Fathers, which I referenced earlier, is a community-based program to bring father figures, men, and boys together to talk about violence and their experiences. They have supported approximately 750 fathers as a prevention approach to address family violence.

A Place to Belong program is largely available across the province. It's for children aged 5 to 15. In the 2023-24 year, approximately 1,600 children were served and supported by that program.

I would like to take the opportunity, where we're talking about affordability, as well, to bridge a bit to another program we haven't been able to touch on yet called Financial Stabilization Payments. That is a program we rolled out about three years ago. I can't recall the exact date; I think it was in Fall 2023. That is a program where we recognize that, when there is an unfortunate circumstance where a child needs to be brought into the temporary care of the minister, there's an unintended financial impact for a parent. Parents who are in receipt of the Canada child benefit, which is a federal program, are only able to receive that if they have care and custody of the child.

When a child is brought into care, any jurisdiction in Canada that is involved with the family makes application and notifies the federal government that the child is now in care of the province. There is a diversion of the Canada child benefit to Children's special allowances, which is paid to the province.

We recognize that this unintended impact is that, on possibly one of the worst days of a parent's life, they are also possibly financially destabilized, as well. While we are working with them to make sure all concerns are addressed and their children are able to safely be at home, they may be struggling to make rent.

We have this new Financial Stabilization Payment program where, once we apply, we immediately replace the lost income or the lost monthly payment for the family. We do that throughout our involvement. Hopefully, we are able to successfully reunite the family. We will continue to do that for three months after reunification, or if, unfortunately, a child must be brought into permanent care, we continue that payment for an extra three months. That is . . .

THE CHAIR: Order. The time for questions has elapsed. I would like to give the opportunity if any of the witnesses would like to make closing comments.

Deputy Minister Beaton.

CRAIG BEATON: I'm pleased to have the opportunity to join you here today, and I appreciate the thoughtful questions and the discussion. As you've heard, there's a lot of work under way within the department, but also right across government, to address affordability for children and families.

We've been able to outline a few. There are many other initiatives here that we could have talked about, as well. We definitely feel, at the department and across government, in terms of some of the corporate initiatives that have taken place in the last

year, it will have a significant impact on families and children in the province. We're pleased to see that.

We know we're not stopping there and that there's work we need to do with our partners and across government to continue to support communities and Nova Scotia families going forward. With that, I would take the opportunity to do a big thank you to the many service providers we work with across the province. In addition to that, to our staff at the Department of Opportunities and Social Development. They show up every day to support Nova Scotians, many of whom are in probably the most difficult situations they may be facing in their lifetime. They do it with grace and with professionalism. I just wanted to say that and thank the committee for your questions today.

THE CHAIR: On behalf of this committee, thank you to the four of you for appearing here today. There's an enormous amount of preparatory work that goes into preparing for committee all in addition to the very important programmatic and policy work that you do. For sure to the service providers but to the large staff that stands behind all of you, our most sincere thanks for their work.

You are all free to leave the meeting. Thank you.

For committee members, we do have a couple more items. We have a deferred motion resulting from our last meeting. I would ask the committee if members would like to discuss this motion now. I think I'm seeing a yes. We will begin by having MLA Hansen, who stated the motion at our last meeting, to please restate that motion.

MLA Hansen.

SUZY HANSEN: My motion is to have the committee write a letter to the Premier's Office and members of the Executive Council to urge this government to address this emergency by taking immediate action to safely house all Nova Scotians facing homelessness by opening as many shelters and supportive housing beds as there are people sleeping outdoors. The letter should additionally urge this government to stop the flow of individuals entering into homelessness by banning Winter evictions to prevent this crisis from worsening.

THE CHAIR: Is there discussion on this motion?

MLA Wong.

HON. BRIAN WONG: I would just like to make a comment really. It's from what we heard from our witnesses. I think a lot of things are changing. I do believe that our vacancy rates and stuff - there's more and more housing. From what I'm understanding, we have a lot of good programs in place, and people are being housed more and more

adequately as things move along. I just want to say, based on the expert testimony that we had today that I think things are changing.

THE CHAIR: Is there further discussion on the motion?

SUZY HANSEN: I think this goes back to what the deputy minister and staff were saying about prevention. We haven't eradicated poverty, especially child poverty. We are hearing now and we see - we could drive down the street right now and see - that there are folks living in tents under a bridge. There are folks who are living unhoused. My question is to create a plan and to write a letter stating that we should have a space for everyone. We are not seeing a space for everyone.

[11:45 a.m.]

It says, "as many shelter beds and supportive housing beds as there are people sleeping outdoors." The letter is just to write to verify that there is action that is needed, and just even by what the presenters presented today and their expertise, there are a lot of things needed. There are over 200 individuals right now who are homeless who are on income assistance that they can see. There's a lot of work that we need to do, and I think making sure that we have beds for people is just a simple thing that we could do to keep people safely out of the cold.

THE CHAIR: MLA MacQuarrie.

KYLE MACQUARRIE: I share, and I'm certain we all share, the sense of urgency. We appreciate the member's efforts in making this motion. We need to acknowledge our successes while continuing to strive to do our best work to support people in need.

There are some issues with the elements of the wording and the precedent it would be setting, so I'm not going to support the motion.

THE CHAIR: Is there further discussion on the motion?

SUZY HANSEN: I would like clarity on the wording that there may be issues with. I'm curious to know what that is.

KYLE MACQUARRIE: In one sense - defining some of the goals and benchmarks that are mentioned here - while the spirit is excellent, achieving it may not be clear. Also, while we were in the House, I'm sure everyone remembers how cold and snowy it was - and icy. The Minister of Opportunities and Social Development ensured Nova Scotians there was a bed available for every person seeking shelter in HRM. I'd be happy to table that. It was stated in the House.

The request that the letter is making has been achieved. I don't see the point in using that letter at this point; there were beds for every person needing shelter at that point in time. I do wholeheartedly agree that we need to continue to strive to make things better because even having an emergency shelter, we can't be satisfied with that. We need to go further, and . . . (interruption)

THE CHAIR: Sorry, MLA MacQuarrie. Were you finished? I did not mean to cut you off.

KYLE MACQUARRIE: No, that's okay.

THE CHAIR: MLA Hamid.

LINA HAMID: We did have this very discussion with folks at Shelter Nova Scotia, and the beds available are not - don't meet the needs of the majority of the folks who are in need of shelter. These are folks who are in need of wraparound services not just a bed to sleep on. Saying there is a bed available for every one of the people who live on the streets is great, but it doesn't actually support them. They can't take those beds because they have extra needs that might put others at that shelter in danger or themselves in danger when they are in those shelters.

While we can appreciate that there are beds available, that doesn't serve the need of the majority of folks who are on the street and in need of housing. This is coming directly from the frontline workers of Shelter Nova Scotia. I don't see that there's any issue with the wording per se because this is a letter going out to the Premier and the Executive Council, not legislation. I don't see that there's an issue with the letter going out. We can do better, and we need to recognize, when we're saying things, what they actually mean.

THE CHAIR: Is there further discussion on the motion?

KYLE MACQUARRIE: The member's comments highlight the deficiencies of the motion because there are enough beds, but some of them may not be appropriate for certain people. That's why we need to rely on the ongoing support of the department and the expertise we have in the department. I wholeheartedly support the spirit of the motion. I have confidence in the department that they will continue to strive to do the best work they can to support people without the letter, without the motion. This will continue.

THE CHAIR: We are approaching the hour, and we'll soon need to call the question.

SUZY HANSEN: I just want to be very clear: This motion has been put forward three times. This is the third time it has been put forward, and every single time it's been about wording. Now we see that the wording is just that. We are asking the committee, as a committee, to write a letter stating what we heard - there is still a need - and there is nothing

wrong with that. To the minister's point that there are enough beds for everyone - there are not. There are over a thousand people on the By Name List who are homeless, who do not have a bed to sleep in.

There are those who have acute needs, who need wraparound supports and we, as a government, are responsible to do that work - I think the acknowledgement in a letter with words on it to kind of let them know that this is happening. We are hearing from experts from many different facets to let us know that this stuff is going on and we should be addressing it. We should, at least, be acknowledging it. I don't see the holdup.

When we think about the work that we do and the work that we could be doing and the work that is being done, we've heard there is more that needs to be done. They will do the work. That's not even an issue. They have a mandate, they have things they have to do, but we as a government have a responsibility, and if we ignore it year after year after year that this is not actually happening, then we're not doing a service to the people of Nova Scotia.

This is actually what's happening right now. There are people who are under the bridge in tents. They are clearly not housed. We need to give them the opportunity to have a safe place and in order to do that, we have to acknowledge it and so this is what the letter is stating. It's not demanding or forcing anybody, because we don't have that as a committee to do that work. We are writing a letter to state that this is the issue, and we want to recognize it in government.

THE CHAIR: If there is no further discussion on the motion, it's time for the question.

All in favour? Contrary minded? Thank you.

The motion is defeated.

The folks from the Legislative Library have very patiently been awaiting a few moments of our time. I would welcome them now, if they would like to come to the table and the microphones to tell us how they can help to support the work of this committee.

Good late morning. In my family on April Fool's Day, you had to get people before 12:00 noon. I'm just telling you all that we are approaching the witching hour. If you would like to please introduce yourselves and proceed with your remarks.

DAVID MCDONALD: I'm David McDonald, the Legislative librarian.

ANNE VAN IDERSTINE: I'm Anne Van Iderstine and I am manager of Information Services with the Legislative Library.

THE CHAIR: Welcome to you both. If you would like to proceed with your remarks, please do.

DAVID MCDONALD: Thank you for entertaining our request to speak to the committee. The topic we are interested in is the briefing package that we provide. As you may be aware, Heather Ludlow spends a fair amount of time creating these briefing packages that we hope you will use in preparing for the committee.

When the library took over about 20 years ago, we started to add things that weren't in the previous committee packages that the Legislative Committees Office did because they didn't have the resources and we did, and so we started to include items in our collection and also references to Hansard. At one time, we even had newspaper articles, but we had to take those out, and then it was one large package. It was too big so we changed the format in 2019 so that now you get a briefing package with links to documents and a little summary of why we think it's something that you might be interested in looking at for committees.

What we want to know is - and we are basically on an information hunting expedition here - do you use these reports when you're preparing for committee meetings? If you do use them, how do you use them? Are there things we could include that you think are missing? Is there anything you find particularly useful with these, or are there things you don't find useful? Basically, is there any other feedback you can provide so we can provide a better product for you?

THE CHAIR: I will provide a moment, in a moment, if there are some initial thoughts. Can I confirm that, for those who might have to take this away and think more robustly, particularly in terms of improvements - we certainly value the services that the Legislative Library provides, up to and including finding gardening books (laughter) to feed my personal passions during the recent sitting.

We don't want you to be spending time on pulling things together if, in fact, they are not being used. To me, that's the spirit of efficiency within an organization - to have these discussions.

Are there members who have any comments at this time?

MLA Hamid.

LINA HAMID: The packages are helpful to our team. They are used to do the research prior to the meetings.

Now, in terms of the time it takes you guys to put that together, I know some of the stuff in there is stuff that we would have - we would have had. Maybe there are discussions about how we could save you guys time based on things that we might already have.

In terms of their use, they are most definitely used in the research prior to the meetings.

THE CHAIR: I am reminded by the clerk that members are welcome to provide feedback through the clerk - or feedback including any questions and comments. I very much appreciate your coming across the street to be here with us and for the multitude of different ways in which you support members of the Legislature and government more broadly. Thank you for that.

This does conclude business for today's committee meeting. Our next meeting is slated for May 6th. The topic is not quite pinned down at this time, but we will be informed by the clerk when that information is available.

Do we have a motion to adjourn?

A motion to adjourn. Thank you.

We are adjourned.

[The committee adjourned at 11:58 a.m.]