

HANSARD

NOVA SCOTIA HOUSE OF ASSEMBLY

STANDING COMMITTEE

ON

HEALTH

Tuesday, May 11, 2021

Video Conference

Agenda Setting

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STANDING COMMITTEE ON HEALTH

Rafah DiCostanzo (Chair)
Hon. Leo Glavine (Vice-Chair)
Hon. Tony Ince
Hon. Ben Jessome
Bill Horne
Barbara Adams
Colton LeBlanc
Susan Leblanc
Kendra Coombes

In Attendance:

Judy Kavanagh
Legislative Committee Clerk

Gordon Hebb
Chief Legislative Counsel



House of Assembly
Nova Scotia

HALIFAX, TUESDAY, MAY 11, 2021

STANDING COMMITTEE ON HEALTH

1:00 P.M.

CHAIR

Rafah DiCostanzo

VICE-CHAIR

Hon. Leo Glavine

THE CHAIR: I call this meeting to order. This is the Standing Committee on Health. I'm Rafah DiCostanzo, the MLA for Clayton Park West, and I'm chairing this meeting today.

Today it's going to be an agenda-setting meeting. Members, the committee clerk, and Legislative Counsel should have their video on at all times. All other staff should have their audio and video turned off, which everybody is used to by now. If you have another device, this is the time to check to make sure it's on silent.

For Hansard, I acknowledge the presence of Legislative Committee Clerk Judy Kavanagh and Legislative Counsel Gordon Hebb. I see them both, wonderful. I would like the members to introduce themselves, starting with the Honourable Leo Glavine.

[The committee members introduced themselves.]

THE CHAIR: We will start with committee business, which is our agenda setting. Members should have their complete list of proposed topics. The clerk emailed it this morning. Does everybody have it? We should end up with six topics: three for the Liberals, two for the PC caucus, and one for the NDP caucus. To avoid confusion, we will have a discussion on each of the topics and then the member from the caucus will state each topic clearly in the form of a motion. We will need to indicate whether we accept a substitute or just the person themselves - for example, the deputy minister or his designate. We also need to indicate whether we want the person to appear - the person holding that job or the individual themselves. If there is staff change, we would need to indicate that as well.

We can look at the topics that we have in front of us. We can start with the Liberal topics. Is there any discussion?

Mr. Jessome, go ahead.

HON. BEN JESSOME: Just to be clear, can I present the proposed motions from the caucus? We have five suggested topics, but we'd like to move three of them.

THE CHAIR: Sure. You can present them one by one, if you don't mind.

BEN JESSOME: I move that our first item be accepted: the recruiting of medical students from, and training medical students in rural areas, the proposed witnesses being - maybe one of my colleagues can hop in here for this one because my list just went kaput.

THE CHAIR: I can read them if I'm allowed. Am I allowed, Ms. Kavanagh?

JUDY KAVANAGH: I would say no, unless counsel says otherwise.

HON. TONY INCE: I can read it for you, Ben. The proposed witnesses are Dr. Katherine Stringer, the Department of Family Medicine, Dalhousie Medical School; Dr. Aaron Smith, Executive Medical Director, Northern Zone, Nova Scotia Health Authority; Dr. Nicole Boutilier, VP Medicine, Nova Scotia Health Authority; and Katrina Philopoulos, Director of Physician Recruitment.

THE CHAIR: There is a note as well, if you don't mind reading it.

TONY INCE: New medical seats, clerkship program and residency programs.

THE CHAIR: Is there any discussion? I see none. Mr. Jessome, would you like to put that as a motion?

BEN JESSOME: Yes, I so move, Madam Chair.

THE CHAIR: Thank you. Our first topic has been accepted. Next.

BEN JESSOME: Secondly, I move . . .

THE CHAIR: Ms. Kavanagh has a question. I apologize.

JUDY KAVANAGH: The motion was made, but there was no vote held on it, unless you want to vote on them all at once at the end.

THE CHAIR: Yes, can we do that at the end, if you don't mind, on three topics? Is that okay with everyone?

BEN JESSOME: Maybe confer with Mr. Hebb, Madam Chair.

GORDON HEBB: You've got a motion so you can't be making another motion now until you deal with that motion first.

THE CHAIR: Go ahead, Mr. Jessome.

BEN JESSOME: I move that Topic 1 for the Liberal caucus be accepted as read.

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

The motion is carried.

Mr. Jessome.

BEN JESSOME: Our second proposed topic: I move that COVID-19 research under way in Nova Scotia be the subject matter and representatives from the COVID-19 Health Research Coalition, such as Gail Tomblin-Murphy, VP Research and Innovation from the NSHA; Dr. Lisa Barrett, infectious disease researcher and physician; Dr. Shelly McNeil, infectious disease researcher and physician; Dr. Joanne Langley, Division Head Council Chair, Infectious Disease Research; and Dr. Jeannie Shoveller, VP Research and Innovation, IWK. So moved.

THE CHAIR: Discussion? Susan Leblanc.

SUSAN LEBLANC: I think this topic is a great idea. I just am concerned with the description of the witnesses being named as "such as." I wonder if we should just choose a couple, or we should say three out of the list or something like that to be more specific, so that we're not confused about who the witnesses should be.

This connects to a larger thing that I was going to bring up afterward, but I might as well bring it up now, which is that for many of these topics, there are a lot of witnesses. I worry that we're going to risk what has been happening at Health Committee and Public Accounts Committee, where the preambles and the introductions go really long, and then there's very little time to ask questions.

I'm wondering if maybe we could put caveats in, either three witnesses or we say there will only be three people to present at the beginning or something like that. That's maybe a discussion for later.

THE CHAIR: Mr. LeBlanc.

COLTON LEBLANC: I guess to add to Ms. Leblanc's comments, I'm not sure if it would be the will of the committee looking at putting parameters at the opening remarks - regardless of if we have three witnesses or six witnesses, that we establish an opening remarks time frame for consistency from meeting to meeting.

THE CHAIR: Any other discussion? Mr. Jessome.

BEN JESSOME: I vaguely remember having this discussion. Probably some of us were here last week or the week previously on the same subject. I forget the exact outcome, but to Ms. Leblanc's point, she's absolutely correct. Sometimes the presentations get a little lengthy and create a barrier for - not a barrier, the information is important, but a reduced amount of time for members to pose questions. I would just defer that to the Chair to manage that, if the intent from all three Parties is to try and maximize the time for questioning.

THE CHAIR: Actually, I brought that up the last time. Ms. Kavanagh, are we able to say 10 minutes for presentations, or is it individually 10 minutes? We can make it 20 minutes or a half-hour maximum? Is there such a thing?

JUDY KAVANAGH: Certainly. The length is up to the committee. What I've been telling them since we started meeting by Zoom is 10 minutes maximum, regardless of the number of witnesses. So if there are five witnesses, they would get two minutes each. If there is one witness, they would get 10 minutes.

If the committee wants to try something else, that's fine. I can pass that along. It's just that it would be at the Chair's discretion to decide whether or not to cut them off when the 10 minutes is up.

THE CHAIR: Fantastic. Ms. Adams.

BARBARA ADAMS: I know we're in the middle of another motion, so perhaps at the end of this we can craft a motion that we're all in favour of.

One of the things is that most of the presenters send their comments to us ahead of time and we've all read them, so to take up the time for them to reread them - perhaps we can set a time parameter around that, and then set a guaranteed time for questions, 20 minutes for the first round, 10 minutes for the second round. Perhaps we can come up with a motion at the end of all of this business to create something that we're all happy with.

THE CHAIR: Let's do a motion right now - Mr. Jessome.

[1:15 p.m.]

BEN JESSOME: Just to clarify - and Mr. Hebb, you can give me a nod if this is okay - but proposed Topic 3, COVID-19 research under way in Nova Scotia, with representatives as read. So moved.

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

The motion is carried.

The last one, Mr. Jessome.

BEN JESSOME: Finally, I move that proposed Topic 4, IWK programs and services across the province and Atlantic Canada, be approved, with representatives from the IWK, including Dr. Krista Jangaard, President and CEO. We'd also like to add Dr. Andrew Lynk as an added voice in the conversation. His specific title escapes me but he's one of the big guys at the IWK and has a voice coming from Cape Breton to Halifax and across the province.

THE CHAIR: Ms. Leblanc

SUSAN LEBLANC: Again, I like the topic but I also feel like this one is very broad. I mean the IWK Health Centre is a huge organization so I wonder if there's a focus that my colleagues in the Liberal Party are trying to achieve with this topic and I'm wondering if maybe it can be more focused in the description. I don't want to put words in her mouth but if I was the CEO, I would have a hard time talking about my entire organization in even the two hours allotted for the meeting. Any feelings on that, if we could focus it in?

BEN JESSOME: I appreciate the comments and I appreciate where they are coming from. I think the intent was to be - while it's important to be specific, it does give us some latitude to ask a variety of questions. Having experienced committee meetings - many of us have, certainly - with Dr. Jangaard and Dr. Lynk in the past on specific items, I believe that they are capable to reciprocate with answers that would be descriptive of a variety of topics, so members could have the latitude to ask questions as they see fit, based on their constituencies and perhaps the COVID-19-related items that are certainly top of mind presently.

THE CHAIR: All right. Any other discussion?

BEN JESSOME: So moved, Madam Chair.

THE CHAIR: Okay. All those in favour? Contrary minded? Thank you.

The motion is carried.

Next we have the . . .

BARBARA ADAMS: I'm sorry, can I ask a clarifying question?

THE CHAIR: Sure. Ms. Adams.

BARBARA ADAMS: Just because of the way the page is printed out, did the Liberals submit five topics or four?

THE CHAIR: We submitted five and three. We have the choice of three and we submitted five, correct.

BARBARA ADAMS: All right. Thank you.

THE CHAIR: You're very welcome. The next is the PC Party. You have three and you get to choose two. Who would like to speak?

Ms. Adams.

BARBARA ADAMS: I'll speak to the first one. Although collaborative health centres are an important issue around the province and we were just sent some more detailed information, it may be more important in certain areas like mine that don't have a collaborative health centre. But the number one thing that's affecting all Nova Scotians is the ongoing COVID-19 response, so the PC Party puts this forward as our No. 1 topic and we would like to invite Dr. Robert Strang and Dr. Brendan Carr.

THE CHAIR: Is there any discussion? Mr. Jessome.

BEN JESSOME: I guess with the precursor information that depending on where we're at with respect to COVID-19, Dr. Strang's time can be extremely limited, I would move that that be amended to include "or designate" as a part of that subject. I know everybody is respectful of Dr. Strang's time, and him being able to designate somebody, in the event that he cannot be there in person, would be an appropriate latitude.

BARBARA ADAMS: I think that the invitation should go to him. We have had instances in the past where other invited guests are unable to attend for whatever reason and we vote on substitutes through the appropriate route that we take. I would suggest that's what we do in this case, should he not be able to attend. He certainly would have enough notice as to the date of the next meeting.

The other thing is, I know we haven't set when he would be asked to attend, but we're hoping it's the first meeting of the next Health Committee as opposed to six months down the road when the urgency hopefully isn't as strong.

COLTON LEBLANC: I just want to say for the record that I'm very appreciative of Dr. Strang's time, but he did make time and was able to join us in committee. It was the first committee that we actually resumed after the hiatus back in September. Recognizing that his time is precious, but he has made time for us before.

BEN JESSOME: Just to clarify, the ask would go directly to Dr. Strang as the primary witness, with the added consideration that someone - and we can vote on an additional designate in the event that he is unable to attend said meeting. I know we're all respectful of the work that he's doing and the time it takes to do that. As the head of the department, I feel like he does have the capacity to enable a designate to meet the requirements of the committee if he so chooses.

THE CHAIR: If we could just repeat the motion. Ms. Adams.

BARBARA ADAMS: I move that the topic of the ongoing COVID-19 response, with the guests being Dr. Robert Strang and Dr. Brendan Carr, be approved.

BEN JESSOME: I did move an amendment there. "Or designate" would be my proposed amendment.

BARBARA ADAMS: We already have a process for if the speaker cannot attend. We go through our process to do that. I don't know why we need to do that in this particular case. The majority of the people who are coming are all - Dr. Brendan Carr is equally a busy man. I respect Dr. Strang greatly, but I don't see the need to modify the list now. If we need to down the road because of his time constraints, we can do it at that time.

BEN JESSOME: I would just add that it does happen kind of consistently in other committees whereby the phrase "or designate" is added and then we don't have to come back to the drawing board again. I think that we can respect departments at any level to enable designates and at the end of the day select the person who takes the place, if necessary - again, with the primary consideration being that Dr. Strang be present.

THE CHAIR: I think that we can vote on the amendment first - correct, Mr. Hebb? Then the motion. All those in favour? Contrary minded? Thank you.

The motion is carried.

Passed with the amendment. Maybe you can repeat the motion, Ms. Adams, with the amendment.

BARBARA ADAMS: Sure. The PC Party of Nova Scotia moves the topic of the ongoing COVID-19 response, with the guests Dr. Robert Strang and Dr. Brendan Carr - or, in the case of Dr. Strang, a designate - be accepted.

THE CHAIR: Thank you, Ms. Adams. All those in favour? Contrary minded? Thank you.

The motion is carried.

Your second topic for the PC caucus, Mr. LeBlanc.

COLTON LEBLANC: I'd like to move that our second topic for the PC caucus be EHS Standards, with witnesses from the Nova Scotia Health Authority, taking into consideration that we've reached out to the Health Authority to see who's responsible for tracking emergency standards. I know there has been some communication and the minister has previously reached out to the CEO, but I'm not sure if the CEO is essentially the person who should be designated.

The second witness from the Department of Health and Wellness - Larry Crewson, director; representatives from the dispatcher union Canadian Union of Postal Workers; Mike Nickerson from IUOE Local 727; and then the Eastern Zone Director - Emergency Program.

THE CHAIR: All right. Any discussion?

All those in favour? Contrary minded? Thank you.

The motion is carried.

So we have the two topics for the PCs. We move on now to the topic from the NDP caucus. Who would like to speak? Ms. Leblanc, go ahead.

SUSAN LEBLANC: Thank you, Madam Chair. The topic that we would like to propose is the first one on the list, which is the health care budget 2022-23 and beyond. We would like to invite members of the Department of Finance and Treasury Board and senior members of the Department of Health and Wellness to discuss forecasts of COVID-19 and other health care-related costs past 2021.

THE CHAIR: There's a motion on the floor. All those in favour? Contrary minded? Thank you.

The motion is carried.

We have passed the six topics: three for the Liberals, two for the PCs, and one for the NDP. Thank you, everyone.

Now we go to committee business. We've done the agenda setting, the organizational chart from the Department of Health and Wellness - everybody has received

that, correct? Then we have the correspondence from the Department of Health and Wellness.

Go back to the organizational chart. Sorry, Judy, I have my notes on the wrong sheet. Here it is.

This was emailed to the members on April 16th, and again this morning, so everybody received that. The second one is the correspondence from the Department of Health and Wellness in response to a request for information made at the meeting of April 13, 2021. It includes CFPT spreadsheets. This was emailed to members on May 4th, and again this morning.

We're okay with that one? Any discussion?

I see none. Any other business? Ms. Adams.

BARBARA ADAMS: I had prepared a motion that I believe has been circulated to all members just at the beginning of the meeting. I'll read the motion and then I'll explain the rationale for the motion.

The motion is that the Standing Committee on Health write a letter to the Minister of Health and Wellness and the Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development requesting that they meet with representatives and reach out to unionized and non-unionized employees and representatives from the early childhood education sector in order to address concerns related to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

[1:30 p.m.]

The subsequent document that was sent to everyone was a letter that we had received on May 11th. MLA Tim Halman and I had received it on behalf of early childhood educators who had been meeting. They have a number of concerns. A reporter did raise those concerns to the Premier and Dr. Strang yesterday. They didn't quite feel that those concerns were answered, and they are feeling that they need more communication and collaboration with the Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development and the Minister of Health and Wellness's office. We're simply asking our committee to write to them to request if they would meet with this particular sector.

THE CHAIR: Mr. Jessome.

BEN JESSOME: I'm having trouble bringing up said motion if it was circulated. Ms. Kavanagh, should that have been?

JUDY KAVANAGH: Yes, I forwarded the motion to all of the members when the Chair called the meeting to order, as the PC caucus requested. I have just now forwarded the tabled document that Ms. Adams has just referred to.

BARBARA ADAMS: Do you want me to read it again?

BEN JESSOME: Yes, please, Ms. Adams.

BARBARA ADAMS: The motion is that the Standing Committee on Health write a letter to the Minister of Health and Wellness and the Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development to meet with representatives and to reach out to unionized and non-unionized employees and representatives from the early childhood education sector in order to address concerns related to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

BEN JESSOME: Just for clarification's sake, I know that there's certainly a relationship between the department and early childhood educators that exists. I believe that there's an approach that exists there so that they could reach out directly. I'm not sure why we need to be . . .

BARBARA ADAMS: I can clarify that. I appreciate that there is that normal route. They have written and tried to communicate but have not had any response back. There were some comments made during the press conference yesterday where a reporter asked two of their main questions, which were surrounding the lack of listing where positive test sites were and around rapid testing at their sites. They are feeling afraid and concerned for the children as well as the staff because of the number of bubbles that people come in and out of coming to their employers. The reporter had asked a couple of questions, but they didn't really get the answers. This is just a letter to request that the ministers consider reaching out to this sector.

THE CHAIR: Any discussion, or shall we just vote on this? Let's vote. All those in favour? Contrary minded? Thank you.

The motion is carried.

Okay, I guess we'll be writing the letter, Ms. Kavanagh, and you will be sending it.

BARBARA ADAMS: Thank you, everyone.

BEN JESSOME: Sorry, Ms. Adams. I appreciate you sending the motion up front, but technology doesn't appear to be in my favour today.

THE CHAIR: The next meeting will be Tuesday, June 8th - oh, sorry, I see a hand. Mr. LeBlanc.

COLTON LEBLANC: Just to wrap up the discussion we had in between motions earlier on, I'm not sure if that's something the committee wishes to pursue regarding opening remarks and time frames for questioning and allowing some time for committee business. To keep math simple, I think the 10- or 20-minute approach for each caucus wraps up to an hour and a half if we split up the remaining half-hour there between 15 for

opening remarks, 15 for business, and I guess in that business we'd have a couple of minutes for maybe closing remarks. That's something I'd propose, is 15 for opening remarks and then base it on how many guests we have. If we have five, then we take that into consideration, but that's my simple math for today.

THE CHAIR: Ms. Leblanc.

SUSAN LEBLANC: I was just going to say that I think that's a great proposal.

THE CHAIR: Mr. Jessome.

BEN JESSOME: The 15 minutes sounds like a good starting block, provided we have three witnesses or more. Does that make sense? We don't need to give one witness or two witnesses more than 10 minutes out of the gate. At the end of the day, I think we're all on the same page, to try and enable more questions, but to Mr. LeBlanc's point, Ms. Leblanc's point as well, I think if we've got any more than three or more witnesses, 15 minutes for the opening remarks would be a reasonable time frame.

THE CHAIR: Ms. Kavanagh.

JUDY KAVANAGH: Can we allow a few minutes at the beginning for the general housekeeping stuff, the introduction of members, that kind of thing? I would think two or three minutes under normal circumstances would probably get that done.

THE CHAIR: We're all in agreement. I think this is a discussion. We're not voting. Are we voting? Is this a motion or just a discussion?

BARBARA ADAMS: I think it should be a motion so that we have set rules.

THE CHAIR: No problem. We put a motion on the floor, and who would like to - Mr. Jessome first, and then we'll go back to Mr. LeBlanc.

BEN JESSOME: I was just going to suggest that perhaps we could leave it up to the discretion of the Chair, because unless we want to be prescriptive about the number of witnesses versus the amount of time we give, I think we can agree to enable the Chair to facilitate the intent behind what we're proposing today.

THE CHAIR: If I may suggest, maybe when we have a lot of witnesses, then a discussion should happen between the clerk and the Chair to identify, but maximum is 15 minutes for that. The clerk and whoever the Chair is that day can make a decision on how to handle the guests and what they're allowed. We're all in favour of limiting the speeches, and we all want more time for questioning. We will work it out, but average, if it's more than two presenters, we can go up to 15 minutes. If it's less, then just 10 minutes. The rest of it can be discussed between the Chair and the clerk. Is that okay for everybody? Is that a motion?

All those in favour? Contrary minded? Thank you.

The motion is carried.

We're a wonderful team, guys. We're all thinking the same way, which is wonderful.

Again, the next meeting is Tuesday, June 8, 2021, via Zoom, and the witness will have to be announced, depending on the new agenda. Thank you again. This was an easy 40 minutes. Have a wonderful afternoon.

[The committee adjourned at 1:39 p.m.]