

# **HANSARD**

**NOVA SCOTIA HOUSE OF ASSEMBLY**

**COMMITTEE**

**ON**

**HUMAN RESOURCES**

**Tuesday, January 25, 2022**

**Video Conference**

**Appointments to Agencies, Boards and Commissions  
Strategies to Attract and Retain People to Rural Areas**

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## **HUMAN RESOURCES COMMITTEE**

Nolan Young (Chair)  
Larry Harrison (Vice-Chair)  
Dave Ritcey  
John A. MacDonald  
Melissa Sheehy-Richard  
Braedon Clark  
Ali Duale  
Kendra Coombes  
Suzy Hansen

[Ali Duale was replaced by Ronnie LeBlanc.]

In Attendance:

Judy Kavanagh  
Legislative Committee Clerk

Gordon Hebb  
Chief Legislative Counsel

## **WITNESSES**

### Department of Labour, Skills and Immigration

Ava Czapalay, Deputy Minister

Jennifer L'Esperance, Acting Senior Executive Director -  
Immigration and Population Growth

Nancy Hoddinott, Senior Executive Director - Skills and Learning

### Nova Scotia Apprenticeship Agency

Marjorie Davison, CEO



House of Assembly  
Nova Scotia

**HALIFAX, TUESDAY, JANUARY 25, 2022**

**STANDING COMMITTEE ON HUMAN RESOURCES**

**10:00 A.M.**

**CHAIR**

Nolan Young

**VICE CHAIR**

Larry Harrison

**THE CHAIR:** Order. I call this meeting to order. This is the Standing Committee on Human Resources. I'm Nolan Young, the Chair and MLA for Shelburne. Today, in addition to considering appointments to agencies, boards, and commissions, we will hear from witnesses on the topic of strategies to attract and retain people to rural areas.

In the interest of public health, this committee has agreed unanimously by email to hold this meeting by video conference. Members, witnesses, the committee clerk, and Legislative Counsel should keep their video on throughout the meeting with their microphone on mute unless I call them to speak. Please turn on your own microphone before speaking and then turn it off afterwards. All other staff should have their audio and video turned off, and if you have another device with you, such as a phone, please put it on silent.

Please try not to leave your seat during the meeting unless absolutely necessary, and if you do, please leave your camera on with your audio muted. That way we know that we have quorum, and we know whether you're present if a vote is called for. If I need Legislative Counsel to confer privately with the clerk or Legislative Counsel or members wish to confer before a vote, I may call a brief recess. If any members have technical problems, please phone or text the clerk.

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

[The committee members introduced themselves.]

THE CHAIR: I also recognize the presence of Chief Legislative Counsel Gordon Hebb and Legislative committee clerk Judy Kavanagh.

We have some committee business today. We have some ABC appointments. I'm going to ask the members if there's any discussion on that. If not, I would ask for a motion.

Hearing no discussion, could I ask for a separate motion for each board member?

Mr. MacDonald.

JOHN A. MACDONALD: Mr. Chair, did you mean for each association versus board member? For example, the Film Classification Board has six different members. Would you want those as six separate motions or just one motion? Just for clarity.

THE CHAIR: My apologies. I think we can put them all under one motion for each specific board, yes. Thank you, Mr. MacDonald.

Mr. MacDonald.

JOHN A. MACDONALD: For the Department of Health and Wellness, I move that Graham Sweett be appointed as the public representative to the Board of Directors of the Nova Scotia College of Dispensing Opticians. As of January 1, 2022, the remuneration for members of this board has been raised to \$175.

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

The motion is carried.

Next up, we have the Board of the College of Occupational Therapists of Nova Scotia. I would ask if there's any discussion or if I could have a motion to accept the member.

Mr. MacDonald.

JOHN A. MACDONALD: For the Department of Health and Wellness, I move that Phillip Veinotte be appointed as member to the Board of College of Occupational Therapists of Nova Scotia. Hopefully I didn't mess up your last name, Phillip.

THE CHAIR: Is there any discussion?

All those in favour? Contrary minded? Thank you.

The motion is carried.

Next, we have the Council of the College of Dental Hygienists of Nova Scotia. Is there a motion?

Ms. Sheehy-Richard.

MELISSA SHEEHY-RICHARD: For the Department of Health and Wellness, I move that Gregory Glynn and Elizabeth Mann be appointed as members to the Council of the College of Dental Hygienists of Nova Scotia.

THE CHAIR: Is there any discussion?

All those in favour? Contrary minded? Thank you.

The motion is carried.

Next up, we have the IWK Health Centre Board. Could I get a motion to accept the member?

Mr. MacDonald.

JOHN A. MACDONALD: For the Department of Health and Wellness, I move that Ashwin Kutty be appointed as director to the IWK Health Centre Board.

THE CHAIR: Is there any discussion?

All those in favour? Contrary minded? Thank you.

The motion is carried.

I think I skipped one there, my apologies. The Board of the Nova Scotia College of Respiratory Therapists. Could I have a motion?

Mr. MacDonald.

JOHN A. MACDONALD: For the Department of Health and Wellness, I move that David Lamb be appointed as public representative to the Board of the Nova Scotia College of Respiratory Therapists.

THE CHAIR: Any discussion?

All those in favour? Contrary minded? Thank you.

The motion is carried.

Next up, we have appointments to the Nova Scotia Prescription Monitoring Board. Would I be able to get a motion, please?

Mr. MacDonald.

JOHN A. MACDONALD: For the Department of Health and Wellness, I move that J. Ronald Surette be appointed as director, public representative, and Sharon Johnson-Legere be appointed as director, public representative to the Nova Scotia Prescription Monitoring Board.

THE CHAIR: Is there discussion?

All those in favour? Contrary minded? Thank you.

The motion is carried.

Lastly, the Film Classification Board. Is there a motion?

Mr. MacDonald.

JOHN A. MACDONALD: For the Department of Service Nova Scotia and Internal Services, I move that Sue Dirani, Karen Laundon, Adam Norton, Joel Furoy, Janis Holmes, and Patricia Moulaison be appointed as members to the Film Classification Board.

THE CHAIR: Is there any discussion on that motion?

All those in favour? Contrary minded? Thank you.

The motion is carried.

We've had a motion that came out of our last meeting by Mr. Duale. Seeing that Mr. Duale's not here right now - Mr. Clark.

BRAEDON CLARK: I think I know where you were going with that. We're on the same page. Given that Mr. Duale is not here, we would just ask to defer that motion, if we could, to the following meeting in February when we expect Mr. Duale will be back. I would like to ask for that.

THE CHAIR: Okay. Seeing nods around, we will defer that.

Our next item is the venue for the February 22<sup>nd</sup> meeting. Is there any discussion on the venue for that? Our options right now would be a virtual or an in-person meeting. Perhaps hybrid might be an option, but is there discussion? Ms. Coombes.

KENDRA COOMBES: In order to do our part to slow the spread of the pandemic, I move that this committee be held virtually for our upcoming meeting in February.

THE CHAIR: We have a motion. Is there any discussion?

All those in favour? Contrary minded? Thank you.

The motion is carried.

Was there any other business that the members wish to discuss?

Our topic today is strategies to attract and retain people to rural areas. I'd like to welcome the witnesses and ask them to introduce themselves, and then we'll begin our opening remarks.

[The witnesses introduced themselves.]

THE CHAIR: Thank you, and welcome. I'll let you begin with your opening remarks.

AVA CZAPALAY: Thank you very much, and good morning. Thank you for the opportunity to discuss the Department of Labour, Skills and Immigration's efforts to attract and retain people in rural Nova Scotia.

Mr. Chair and committee members, I feel like I should share some of my family's story with you as it is relevant to today's topic. My father's parents immigrated to Nova Scotia 100 years ago last Summer. Like many immigrants, they came to Canada to start a new life for themselves and for their children. Like many, they were responding to a call for workers.

In 1921, Nova Scotia needed coal miners, and my grandfather decided to change the course of his family's history by moving his work as a coal miner from Hungary in Central Europe to Springhill in Nova Scotia. I know that life in Springhill was sometimes difficult for my grandparents, but in many ways, it was also a very good life. It was a new life that allowed for things beyond simply surviving day-to-day - things like a flower garden, music lessons, teacher's college, and university for the children. When I think of my father's parents, I am grateful for their sacrifices, and grateful that they chose to settle here in Nova Scotia.

I, too, was raised in rural Nova Scotia. I grew up in Barrington Passage which, as you know, Mr. Chair, is in Shelburne County. I know first-hand the value of a rural Nova Scotia lifestyle, and I am passionate about sharing my experience with others.

[10:15 a.m.]

I don't think my family's story is special or unique. Many newcomers are choosing to start lives in rural Nova Scotia. Initially they come for work, but what will keep them in these communities will be new friends, welcoming and safe places, and access to services and activities.

I am so pleased to share that more people than ever before are choosing to come and to stay here in Nova Scotia. You will recall that on December 16, 2021, Nova Scotia became one million strong. This was the first time that our population reached one million people. This is an important milestone towards our goal of reaching a population of two million people by 2060.

The growth we are experiencing did not happen overnight or without planning. Several years ago, Nova Scotians began to intentionally consider how we might start to grow our population. Over the years, we have worked hard to develop a strong immigration program. We have worked to attract and retain international students and students from elsewhere in Canada. We have worked to keep our young people at home, to help them see opportunities in places like Springhill and Barrington Passage and elsewhere.

A few of our recent population growth accomplishments include the following stats. In November, with only 11 months reporting, Nova Scotia welcomed its highest number of immigrants ever, and that's with 7,690 people and counting. Last year, the department of Labour, Skills and Immigration supported 1,800 international student graduates to stay and work in Nova Scotia. That is a significant increase from the 35 graduates approved for 2014.

Also, this past year, just under 10,000 people moved here from elsewhere in Canada. This is the largest number in 50 years. In addition, Nova Scotia has experienced a net interprovincial migration of youth aged 15-34, which was also the highest in 50 years.

We won't stop here. Nova Scotia cannot rely on growing its population naturally. We have more deaths than births each year. Therefore, to grow our population, we need to be strategic. Our growth must be well-planned. Our strategy is based on increasing immigration and in-migration and on keeping more people here in Nova Scotia.

I'd like to share with you some examples of activities, strategies, and successes that we have in place and will continue to build on to attract and retain people in rural Nova Scotia. One of our key actions related to population growth is to increase the number of



immigrants who choose to settle here. We are working to increase the number of immigrant landings to 21,000 per year.

We know that a key part of retaining immigrants in Nova Scotia is to make sure that their partners and their family members are set up for success. Our 18 settlement service providers located throughout Nova Scotia are critical to helping ensure that success. In 2022, we will continue to work with partners like ISANS and the YMCA, who assist these families in communities throughout the province. Working alongside our settlement providers are other community-based partners, including the municipalities, as well as Chambers of Commerce, business development groups, the Regional Enterprise Networks, and sector councils, who are all focused on helping connect people and jobs.

We will work with employers to ensure they can access the workers they need through immigration. Between 2017 and 2021, the Atlantic Immigration Pilot, for example, brought almost 4,500 people to work and live in Nova Scotia thanks to job offers from more than 1,500 designated employers. Over 40 per cent of the designated businesses participating in the Atlantic Immigration Pilot were located outside of HRM. We are hopeful that with the new permanent program, launched on January 1<sup>st</sup>, this trend will continue.

In addition to the Atlantic Immigration Program, many of our immigration streams are focused on working with employers to address labour gaps and to provide a critical way for us to attract workers to rural Nova Scotia. For example, our entrepreneurship stream, which was established in 2016, helps bring experienced business owners and senior business managers to Nova Scotia. Under this program, 31 entrepreneurs have opened businesses throughout the province.

Ashwood Care, located in Cookville, Nova Scotia, is one example. The entrepreneur, who was nominated just this month, completely transformed a building in an official 17-unit long-term care and assisted living facility. Today, Ashwood provides an essential service in an underserved rural area.

In order to continue to attract newcomers, LSI is leading a bold new marketing effort: The Population Growth Campaign. The campaign was launched in December, with a \$2.5 million investment, and aims to increase the number of inter-provincial migrants and immigrants to all parts of the province. The campaign highlights the opportunities in skilled trades, particularly in construction and in health care by profiling the lifestyle advantages we have in Nova Scotia.

To assist with newcomers appreciating the opportunities in rural Nova Scotia, we have hired six navigators to personally respond to inquiries resulting from the campaign. These navigators will work in regional offices alongside our local partners located in Cape Breton, Cumberland/Colchester/Hants, Digby/Yarmouth/Shelburne, Halifax/Pictou/Antigonish/Guysborough, and the South Shore/Annapolis regions.

We're hopeful that the campaign's priority focus on health care and skilled trades will help us address labour shortages in those specific sectors. This in turn will help us address health care and housing needs while growing municipal and provincial tax bases. A larger tax base will help to pay for services and infrastructure that will benefit all Nova Scotians, such as roads, schools, and hospitals.

Targeted recruitment efforts are based on labour market information and forecasts. By using this evidence-based model, we can build strategies to attract skilled labourers in sectors that need them the most. For example, it is estimated that the province will require more than 11,000 new certified tradespeople in 31 trades over the next 10 years due to recovery, new growth, and retirements. Skilled labourers have been a key focus, including the construction sector where new home construction and new large hospital projects have increased demand.

LSI announced new integration streams for 2021 for construction trade helpers and labourer positions, as well as heavy equipment operators. A pathway for hospitality workers was also announced in the Fall and will directly help rural employers who have struggled to attract these workers.

On the apprenticeship side, after a drop in 2019/2020 due to the pandemic, the number of active apprentices is up 4.1 per cent to 7,346 in 2021. Of these, 3,774 apprentices are dispersed throughout the province, outside the central region. That's just over half.

I'd like to talk now, just briefly, on our focus on youth. Increasing youth participation in trades and apprenticeship is an important area of focus that will help attract and retain young people in communities throughout the province. Apprenticeship is a post-secondary education and training system that leads to certification and life-long quality careers in the skilled trades. The Nova Scotia Apprenticeship Agency has invested in several programs that help to attract youth and increase diversity and inclusion. These programs include a rural focus so that we can reach youth in their home communities.

The apprenticeship agency, for example, offers employers in the Apprenticeship Start Program financial incentives that will help them hire and train apprentices in the skilled trades during the full term of apprenticeship, which can be up to three to four years. When employers hire apprentices from underrepresented groups, the hiring and completion incentives are doubled from \$2,500 to \$5,000 for each year of the apprenticeship. Employers who train an equity apprentice to certification may be eligible for up to \$30,000 to support their costs.

Attraction and retention of young people in our communities is critical. When our youth see themselves in careers and connected to jobs, they're more likely to stay and build their lives here. At LSI, we provide several programs aimed at connecting employers with young people. The programs include things like Student Summer Skills Incentive,

Cooperative Education Incentive, Graduate to Opportunity, and Innovate to Opportunity. Small to medium-sized businesses can access funding through these programs to support their hiring needs and encourage economic growth.

We also support businesses by connecting people to jobs, and jobs to people, throughout the Nova Scotia Works providers. There are 16 providers who deliver employment and career services in person and online, in more than 50 communities throughout Nova Scotia. In 2021, through the Nova Scotia Works services, we supported more than 1,500 employers and 6,000 new job seekers.

Another way we help employers attract and retain people is helping them to create more welcoming workplaces. By making our workplaces more inclusive and welcoming, employers will be successful in attracting, engaging, and retaining the workers they need. Employers can access the Welcoming Workplaces tool for free, and they can also access professional development resources on diversity inclusion through programs such as the Workplace Innovation and Productivity Skills Incentive and the Workplace Education Initiative, and SkillsonlineNS.

I began my remarks by highlighting the incredible growth Nova Scotia has been experiencing. I also note our government's goal of two million people by 2060. Our planned approach to population growth must ensure that all regions benefit. Continued collaboration with employers, municipalities, and a wide array of partners in communities throughout Nova Scotia will help to support this growth.

From Cape Breton to Digby, from Truro to Guysborough, from Springhill to Barrington, we want new arrivals to recognize their own potential in communities big and small. No matter where they choose to live, we want them to stay here and thrive. We want newcomers to thrive like Sasha Raz, who moved here from Israel in 2020 and chose Bridgewater to be his new home. Sasha said that since he moved here, he has "rejoiced again and again over the spectacular natural beauty" he has found in Nova Scotia. He describes the people here as being "sincere, kind, friendly, with a lot of sensitivity to others' emotions and a genuine willingness to help anyone."

Members of this committee, when we talk about strategies to attract and retain people in rural parts of the province, being a welcoming province may be the most important feature we have. I think we can all agree that our growing diverse population will only serve to make Nova Scotia stronger. Thank you for your time. We are happy to take your questions.

THE CHAIR: Thank you very much, Ms. Czapalay. Because we're in a virtual setting, would the members be okay if we went 20-20-20 within the questioning? Seeing a consensus of yes. We will start with the Liberal Party. Just a reminder: We will do 20-20-20 with each of the parties with a 10-10-10 follow-up. Please remember to wait until I recognize you before speaking.

With that said, we can start with the Liberal Party. Mr. LeBlanc, I think I see your hand up.

RONNIE LEBLANC: My question is more related to my role as a critic for Acadian Affairs. Like most rural communities, we're facing labour shortages and more and more companies are turning to immigration - the Atlantic Immigration Pilot and other programs.

Some questions I'm getting asked as critic are around the strategy or the implementation of francophone immigration. I know that there is the Nova Scotia Francophone Immigration Action Plan that was developed, and it was from 2019 to 2021.

I want to be clear that Acadian communities support immigration. We absolutely need it. We're supporting our businesses to try to meet their demands, but at the same time there's a need to increase francophone immigration at a similar level to be able to keep the culture and language, and maintain the services we have.

There are quite a number of objectives in the action plan. I don't know if you could speak to those action items and maybe the outcomes you've seen up to this point.

THE CHAIR: Ms. Czapalay.

AVA CZAPALAY: We're very proud of the Francophone Immigration Action Plan. Thank you for raising that. We know that our francophone communities throughout Nova Scotia provide very warm and welcoming places for immigrants and newcomers. We're working with a very engaged and committed team on the Action Plan to ensure that our objectives are met.

I'll ask my colleague Jennifer L'Esperance, who just met recently with the team on the action plan, to provide a few additional remarks.

THE CHAIR: Ms. L'Esperance.

JENNIFER L'ESPERANCE: Yes, we are very committed to increasing landings of francophone immigrants in the province. We have great partnerships with stakeholders and community groups. We also work with la FANE, a settlement agency, to make sure that when newcomers arrive who are French-speaking that they have a settlement service in their first voice that they are able to access.

We've also made great progress with our landings. We've been able to use a stream under our provincial nominee program called the Labour Market Priorities stream, where we can look at a database of individuals with first language being French and invite them to apply to our programs. We've done four of those draws over the course of that three-year action plan, and it has resulted in a significant increase in landings. I believe in terms of

percentage, we went from 3-point-something per cent to about 7.6 per cent of francophone landings. I will check on those numbers just to be certain, but we have significantly increased.

[10:30 a.m.]

As you noted, the action plan is coming to the end, so we're looking at creating another version of this action plan, a 2.0, and really increasing it to encourage francophone candidates, not only from other countries, but also from the rest of Canada to come and join us in Nova Scotia.

THE CHAIR: Just before you speak, my apologies. We started the questioning at 10:27 a.m. We'll go to 10:47 a.m. I forgot to mention that. Mr. LeBlanc.

RONNIE LEBLANC: I appreciate the answer and I'm quite happy to see that the percentages are increasing, because it is very important for our Acadian communities.

As you said, the action plan ended in 2021, and you are working on updating it. My question is: In terms of consultation and reaching out to the Acadian communities, could you elaborate a little bit more on what your intention is with public consultation?

THE CHAIR: Ms. L'Esperance.

JENNIFER L'ESPERANCE: We have a few layers of teams that we're working with. We have a senior partnership team which includes CSAP, Université Sainte-Anne, and then also a working group that includes CDÉNÉ-FANE. We work quite closely with those who are working with the francophone community to really understand how we can best attract, support, and retain those francophone newcomers in our communities.

Francophone immigration is a top priority of the federal government as well, so we have really great, close partnerships with the federal government, who of course we negotiate all of our immigration streams with, because it is joint jurisdiction. They have also undergone some great initiatives like the Welcoming Francophone Communities initiative in Claire. We ensure that we keep in close contact to make sure that we can support communities such as Clare as well.

RONNIE LEBLANC: Like you mentioned in your opening remarks, immigration is key when it comes to meeting labour shortages. Clare is no different than, I'd say, most rural communities where many industries, from health to the fishery are struggling to meet those needs. When speaking with industries, especially as fisheries critic, the point they raise most often is the lack of housing. They're taking part in the Atlantic Immigration Pilot - now it's permanent - they've had great success there, but they're feeling the pressure when these employees become permanent residents. They want to find a home, so if they can't find a home they start looking elsewhere.

There has been a lot of discussion around housing, especially in the Fall sitting, but a lot of it has been centred on HRM. My question is: Are you working closely with businesses to try to address those housing needs? In the end, from health to the fishery, without housing it will be impossible to retain these employees.

AVA CZAPALAY: It's very true that in order to attract and retain people to Nova Scotia and to communities in Nova Scotia, we need to provide services like housing to the newcomers. For the Department of Labour, Skills and Immigration, it's not about addressing one priority or the other; we need to continue to work with our many partners both across government and throughout the province to help address the housing issue.

I would like to mention to you some of the things that we are doing to help people arrive with the skills that are needed to build the housing stock and also to create our own additional expertise here in Nova Scotia. For example, I mentioned in my remarks the marketing campaign. That marketing campaign is focused on attracting skilled trades workers and also health care workers to Nova Scotia so these people will be coming here job-ready with the skills needed to help build our housing stock.

I would also like to invite my colleague Marjorie Davison to mention some of the things the Nova Scotia Apprenticeship Agency is doing to create the skills within our own population to help address the housing shortage.

MARJORIE DAVISON: Yes, I can speak to what the apprenticeship system - what we're doing and how we're trying to contribute to supporting the availability of workforce who can build the safe and affordable housing through the province. These are jobs that are right within the realm of the skilled trades, particularly in the residential sector.

I think you've been hearing that we are experiencing labour shortages across the province, particularly in the residential construction sector. Our deputy mentioned the Apprenticeship START Program, which does provide incentive for particularly rural small and medium-sized employers to hire apprentices. That is an incentive.

We also provide wage subsidies for those employers who would give opportunities to newcomers to be able to demonstrate their skills in the skilled trades. Many of them come to Nova Scotia with those skills in hand, but they need opportunity to get into the workforce, to demonstrate what they know, and then to be ushered by the employer to continue to develop their skills. We have a program with the Immigrant Services Association of Nova Scotia to do that as well.

We're also looking at our own general amendments and flexibilities that we can build to support growing that funnel of who can come into an apprenticeship. It's really important with the critical shortages ahead of us to get the message out to youth and to many equity-seeking communities about the opportunities in the skilled trades. So we work in parallel with the employers to provide those opportunities, put those supports in place,

and then, with those youth, to bring them in and to give them the skills they need to work in the sector. Those are some of the things we're doing to build more flexibility and to ensure that the skills are there, particularly in the residential sector.

RONNIE LEBLANC: I'll pass it on to my colleague, Mr. Clark.

THE CHAIR: Mr. Clark.

BRAEDON CLARK: Just a couple of questions. I was interested in looking at the stats around the provincial nominee program. I would say that I think my area, perhaps, has benefited more from it than any other, in West Bedford and so on. Obviously, I don't represent a rural area, so I want to spread out the wealth as best I can.

What I thought was interesting was that between 2012 and 2020, about 82 per cent of nominees through that program said they intended to settle in Halifax, in the HRM. Obviously, HRM represents about 50 per cent, maybe a little less, of the overall population, so there's a big gap there.

My question for whomever, perhaps the deputy, is: How do you close that gap to make it a bit more proportional, and is it possible, realistically? Urbanization, as we know, is a trend across Canada and around the world, and immigrants disproportionately seek to land in urban areas. So how do you close that gap, and realistically, how far can you close it?

THE CHAIR: Ms. Czapalay.

AVA CZAPALAY: A focus of the marketing campaign that I mentioned that we launched in December is to ensure that all of Nova Scotia benefits from population growth, and to that end, we've hired six navigators. The head navigator is based in Lunenburg, and the other navigators are dispersed in communities throughout Nova Scotia. Those navigators will be working closely with local partners - and I mentioned them, the Chambers and the RENs and so on - to help people making inquiries as a result of the Population Growth Campaign connect to work in communities.

It's early days in the campaign, but I can tell you from the initial inquiries, first we are getting a lot of inquiries from skilled trades workers and from health care workers. The campaign is landing where it should in terms of connecting with those folks. They're asking questions like: Where can I find a job to work as a nurse if my partner is an automotive mechanic? When we get that kind of inquiry, we work with our government partners, and we also quickly work with communities to see how we can connect these newcomers to a community where they'll find work.

Finding work is the number one goal. Then we connect very deeply into the communities, so the communities can share what it's like to live in that particular area.

Then all of the other things that come along with supporting a lifestyle in rural Nova Scotia come after the initial connection to work.

THE CHAIR. Mr. Clark.

BRAEDON CLARK: You talked a bit about the most important factor of course being employment. I'm also curious about cultural engagement and cultural attachment. You mentioned at the beginning about your grandfather coming from Hungary in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, and I'm sure it was quite lonely at times and difficult. I know in my constituency there's a very large Muslim population, very large Chinese-Indian population, so people have a sense of community from the get-go. The mosque is down the street or wherever, so they have that connection, which helps them lay down roots, which of course is the second piece.

Recruitment is fantastic, but retention is really the magic part of it. In rural areas where those organic communities might not exist, how do you provide that level of social and cultural attachment so that people want to stick around for decades?

AVA CZAPALAY: Thank you for your kindness in acknowledging that a lot of newcomers might experience loneliness. I do think of my grandmother. I mentioned her to my colleagues. She lived in Nova Scotia for 70 years and she did not speak a lot of English at the end of her 70 years of living here. Her life was within the home. I keep that in my heart, because I do acknowledge that when we accept newcomers into Nova Scotia, when we welcome them here, the welcome has to go deep. It has to go beyond that initial connection to a job.

We're lucky in Nova Scotia to have a lot of community groups who really put their heart into welcoming newcomers. Actually, my very first meeting as a deputy in February was meeting with a group from Cape Breton. I believed they were called the Cape Breton Welcome Group. It's an initiative under the Cape Breton Partnership. It was on a Zoom call, and you could not have met a more welcoming group of people. It was my very first meeting on Day 1, and I'll always remember them. I thought to myself, this is exactly what communities need to do: bring people together. They were volunteers from all communities in Cape Breton there to help out and to make sure that they put a welcoming face forward when newcomers land in Cape Breton.

I also want to point out that I have a long history of working with the universities and the community college, and those are natural assets that are based in our communities. Not only do they have a diverse student population, but they also have a diverse faculty and staff population, and those assets can be leveraged, I would think, to better ensure connections to communities.



[10:45 a.m.]

My colleague Jen L'Esperance oversees the settlement program, which is a program that's funded by our department. We fund 18 settlement providers throughout Nova Scotia, and Jen I'll ask if you can say a few more words about that program.

JENNIFER L'ESPERANCE: Thank you for the question, and thank you, deputy. The Cape Breton welcoming communities initiative that you mentioned is definitely one to highlight. We took that on as a pilot project two years ago to be able to support the Cape Breton Partnership. They had surveyed the community, and the community were the ones who had said, not only are we interested in immigration and more newcomers to the province but we want to help and we want to get more involved.

So at the end of last year - let's say in October or so - there were about 80 volunteers throughout Cape Breton who were helping that through many smaller communities. Places like Cape Breton have recognized that. While we have 18 different settlement service providers across the province, they can't be in every small community, so volunteer groups - and we help to support some of those volunteer groups to get to places like Port Hood and Judique to be able to support the newcomers who are coming to their communities so that they feel less lonely.

Something we've heard is, we've spent a lot of effort working on welcoming workplaces and safe workplaces, and we continue to do that, but welcoming communities and neighbours who will bring you some banana bread when you get to your new home are just as important.

We do a lot of work with employers as well, where when they think about the settlement that they have to provide for the newcomers who are coming to work in their workplaces, they wonder about the financial burden that might cause for the families to be able to be supported through settlement. Often, it's more just about making them feel welcome. We've heard a lot of stories about a flower from a home country and a handwritten card when the person gets to the door. That goes a really long way, especially in some of the rural communities, to making people feel welcome.

Just the last thing I'll note is that we also have YREACH, who are out in the communities making sure that they really understand the needs in those communities. They're in nine different communities across the province as well, and we fund those settlement supports.

If you don't mind, I do just want to state the francophone numbers, just to make sure we have the correct numbers on the record. The amount of applications that we supported in 2018, when we started this action plan, was 0.5 per cent of the applications coming through our provincial nominee program were first-language French-speaking candidates. Then in 2020 it was up to 11 per cent, and then in 2021 we were at 6.4 per cent:

just a demonstration of the increase in the amount of applications that we've supported with French as a first language.

THE CHAIR: Thank you. We'll be moving on to the NDP. Ms. Coombes.

KENDRA COOMBES: First, I want to thank you all for being here on this topic. It's very dear to my heart, being a Cape Bretoner.

You mentioned the welcoming groups and the Cape Breton Partnership specifically. When I say this, I mean no offense to any of you who are witnesses today. I know you're good at your jobs and you care about what you're doing. By prefacing that, I think it would have been very beneficial to our conversation today had we been able to have the groups on the ground who are doing this work of not just recruiting but doing the retention of newcomers in our rural areas.

I just wanted to make that point. It's a very important one, as you just made as well in your remarks.

Some of the main components of attracting and retaining people to rural areas - of course, we've talked about it. It's employment opportunities and supports. I'd like to begin by asking a couple of question about Island Employment in Cape Breton. The organization's employees previously provided employment supports, and many of them are now out of work - thirty of them. The Province announced last week that a new service provider is going to be in place to replace the Island Employment, who shut their doors after the department pulled the funding.

According to former employees, the new providers have posted for 22 positions in the new contract. Of the 60 positions previously based in Sydney, 11 specialist positions were not posted either in Sydney or anywhere in Cape Breton. My question is: Why were the jobs replaced in a way that appears that the former employees - all 30 - can no longer qualify?

THE CHAIR: Ms. Czapalay.

AVA CZAPALAY: I just want to acknowledge that you're correct when you say that employment supports are critical for communities. We're very proud of our network of Nova Scotia Works services. As I mentioned in my opening remarks, we have 16 service providers that provide services to 50 communities throughout Nova Scotia. You can't go very far into a community without seeing a Nova Scotia Works office. The intent there is to provide community-based services so people who live in the community see the needs of the community and can meet with people without them having to travel too far to get the supports that they need.

The types of supports that are offered are things like resume writing and job preparation, interview preparation, and even working with employers to help them connect with people who are looking for work. The services are essential.

I mentioned last week that when we looked at all of the information compiled through the Ombudsman report and also through our own consultation with Internal Audit, Department of Justice - and then also the lack of response from the board and the management at Island Employment - we reached a decision that it was essential to end our contract with that organization. That did not mean that we were ending our commitment to Cape Breton. The money and the jobs will stay in Cape Breton. We moved very quickly to put an interim provider in place so that the services would continue to be provided to Cape Bretoners.

Last week, we were very happy to be able to announce that the two providers were identified, and as you mentioned, they're now in the process of hiring and starting to ramp up and offer those services. My colleague Nancy Hoddinott oversees the skills and learning branch. I'd ask Nancy if she has anything else she'd like to add to answer the question.

THE CHAIR: Ms. Hoddinott.

NANCY HODDINOTT: Just building on the deputy's comments, we are fully and continue to be committed to ensuring that our employment services that are offered throughout the province are accessible in rural communities. We have good relationships with the providers, and the providers are providing the types of services that we require through our agreements with them.

In the expression of interest for the new providers in Cape Breton - and also in our negotiation of the final contracts with these two providers - we wanted to ensure that we were investing the same amount of funding and we were supporting the same number of career practitioners in Cape Breton that would have been with Island Employment.

The career practitioner field is a broad term for folks who work in employment services and provide these services. Within that field, we know that providers - these 16 organizations - will define whether there are some specialist roles or some different types of titles or positions that they want to include in their mix, or if they want to have more generalized positions.

We know that the positions we're funding are within the same salary ranges as other practitioners get paid across the province in these fields. At the end of the day, we really wanted to allow these two new organizations to make the decisions about the specific positions that they were hiring for, and the positions that they would need now, so they can continue to operate and provide the ongoing service in Cape Breton and ensure that employers are meeting the needs that they have.

We will continue to monitor those providers to ensure that clients are continuing to be served and that the outcomes with those clients - including individuals who are looking for work, as well as employers - continue to be met.

KENDRA COOMBES: With respect to that, there were 30 positions. There are now only 22 positions that can be filled. Again, with respect, I would argue that the workers who were the whistleblowers in this case were very much punished - and at no fault of their own. They had lost their jobs and they have been punished. They've been further punished by not being able to go into these positions.

About five of the new posted jobs will be located in Sydney, where there was previously an office of 16. The rest of the jobs were posted for areas elsewhere in Cape Breton. One of the individuals who contacted us observed - and we also noticed - that some might find these services and jobs have been moved out of Sydney and into other areas which happen to be Conservative ridings. I'm just wondering if you can respond to those observations made by the workers.

NANCY HODDINOTT: The number of positions that we've funded through our agreement with Island Employment was 23 positions. We ensured that the positions that we negotiated through the new contracts with the providers were the equal number of positions in the service providers.

In terms of the locations of the roles - again, we have two new service providers. Rural areas are very important. They need to determine the locations of those career practitioner roles in the areas where they feel there is a need, and where the services are needed most critically right now.

In addition to the positions that are currently being posted, the YMCA, which was an interim provider - so, we wanted to ensure as well that there was no service dropped through this process, and that clients continue to be served from the period of time that the contract with Island Employment ended and a new service provider was selected. We did that through an interim service delivery contract with the YMCA.

What the YMCA did was actually, in that period, advertise for term positions. I believe there were 14 of those positions that were advertised. They hired a number of those roles through the interim period, and my understanding is they're looking now at whether they're going to make those positions permanent. The individuals who applied and were awarded those positions may now not have to reapply. They may get those jobs on a permanent basis, but, again, that's for that organization to determine if that's the route they're going to go. Those were additional 14 positions in an interim basis that were filled as well during this period.

KENDRA COOMBES: I'm going to move on to another question. Members of the committee will know that a living wage is calculated based on actual expenses to show

exactly how much a household would have to earn to cover all basic necessities and allow families to enjoy a decent quality of life. It is significantly higher than the province's minimum wage. For example, in Cape Breton, \$18.45/hour; Annapolis Valley, \$21.30/hour; the southern end, \$21.03/hour; in the northern, \$19.20/hour. Experience in Alberta, Ontario, and across the U.S. shows that big increases in minimum wage don't create inflation or job loss, yet the Premier has not agreed with the path to a \$15 minimum wage recommended by the Minimum Wage Review Committee.

[11:00 a.m.]

What advice has your department given to this government about the Minimum Wage Review Committee's recommendations?

AVA CZAPALAY: We thank the Minimum Wage Review Committee for their work. They have taken a very thoughtful and well-considered approach. We were very pleased that the Premier was able to meet directly with the Minimum Wage Review Committee on Friday. He thanked them for their work and accepted their report. We will be moving in a measured way forward to looking at increasing the minimum wage. On April 1<sup>st</sup>, it will be consistent with the Consumer Price Index - I believe that is the term - and going forward from there.

It's a balanced approach. What we're hearing from employers is that transparency is really important so that they can plan for increases. What we're hearing from workers is that they need to be able to have a wage that they can live off of. We're pleased that we're able to move forward on the recommendations of the Minimum Wage Review Committee.

KENDRA COOMBES: You just mentioned a "measured approach." What kind of measured approach activities is the department doing to work toward a higher minimum wage of \$15 on the path to, as you mentioned, a wage that they can live on?

AVA CZAPALAY: The Minimum Wage Review Committee is in place to really do a deep dive into all of the things that they need to consider in order to recommend a pathway forward. We have economists who help support that work. We also look at the economic forecast and a variety of other things and provide that information to the Minimum Wage Review Committee.

The committee is made up, by the way, of representatives from both employers and employee groups. The committee met over a period of time and provided us with the recommendation and a pathway forward. I'm thinking it was a pathway to 2024 for \$15 an hour. I believe that committee report is public and posted.

KENDRA COOMBES: Unfortunately, had we accepted recommendations years ago, we would have been on that path today, actually, with a \$15 minimum wage.

My question is a yes or no: Has the Department of Labour, Skills and Immigration recommended a \$15 minimum wage on the path to a living wage?

AVA CZAPALAY: It's the Minimum Wage Review Committee's report that we table. That report is what the government then considers, in terms of what they want to implement and how they want to implement it. It's the actual report of the Minimum Wage Review Committee. I'm happy to see that there's a pathway forward and that we'll be moving forward with their recommendations in the coming weeks.

KENDRA COOMBES: Thank you. I'll move to another question with regard to health. Access to health care is patchy at best outside of Halifax. Rural areas have particular challenges, as many of us who live in them know. ER closures on a daily basis and lack of access to primary care can cause significant wait times for emergency care, and ER closures have increased again in this last year. The problem is particularly acute in the rural areas. The pandemic has exacerbated many of these challenges.

My question is: What work does your department do with the Department of Health and Wellness to improve access to health care in the rural areas in order to attract and retain our populations?

AVA CZAPALAY: We recognize that it's very important for rural Nova Scotia to work hard with their partners to attract and retain health care workers. I mentioned that we have our marketing campaign. We're getting a lot of inquiries from health care workers who feel like they would like a change in their career and feel that practising their profession here in Nova Scotia might be something that gives them a bit of work/life balance. We will work hard with our navigators who are in place to help those health care workers connect to opportunities in rural Nova Scotia.

We also work with the Office of Healthcare Professionals Recruitment to be strategic and aligned with their efforts to ensure that we can recruit health care workers who are ready to practice in their fields. We're planning to use virtual and international recruitment activities targeting health care workers in the coming month. Collectively, we're working in close partnership with other government departments to ensure that, first of all, we have health care workers coming to Nova Scotia, and that they connect to jobs.

There are other aspects of supporting the health care workers in rural Nova Scotia, such as working closely with the Workers' Compensation Board, for example, which is part of our department, to help health care workers who are not at work gradually return to work in areas and jobs that they can do in the health care sector. For example, if someone is off on a back injury, perhaps they can ease back into a work environment by taking phone calls or providing some other service that doesn't require physical strength.

We're looking at ways where we can get more workers back into the workforce through other mechanisms. We have other things filled. I'll pause there in case you have a follow-up question in that regard.

THE CHAIR: Ms. Coombes, we have a little under three minutes left.

KENDRA COOMBES: Yes, and I am passing that off to my colleague, MLA Hansen.

THE CHAIR: Ms. Hansen.

SUZY HANSEN: Thank you. My question is also going to tie into health care. We know that there are many people who don't have access to public health care. Many of them will be people who we're hoping to attract and retain in our rural areas.

We know people in Nova Scotia are granted refugee status but have not yet applied for permanent residence. There are people in Nova Scotia making applications for permanent residence based on humanitarian and compassionate grounds, and children are born in Nova Scotia to parents who are not eligible to MSI. Is your department working toward extending MSI to all residents?

You did mention previously if there was a back injury, they would just look for other employment in a moderate way so that it's not as stressful or taxing on their health. Is MSI something that you're working on for all residents?

AVA CZAPALAY: As it relates to government-assisted refugees, I'll ask my colleague Jennifer L'Esperance to respond to you.

JENNIFER L'ESPERANCE: We do have a long history of having welcoming communities for government-assisted refugees. When they arrive, they are permanent residents. They do have access to health care then - the families. The government has provided additional assistance to the refugee health care clinic recently so that the new arriving refugees have the access to the health care that they need as well. I think I'll leave it at that.

THE CHAIR: Ms. Hansen, you have about 50 seconds.

SUZY HANSEN: Well, this is about housing. I'm just going to make a comment. I'm appreciative of all of the things that were said earlier. As well, I'm extremely grateful that there are supports in place for those families who come here from afar, ready to settle and continue to stay here.

We know that housing is a huge crisis. I'm hoping that there's a strategy in place for housing for those families who come here based on the fact that right now there's not

even a living wage and health care is - there are a number of pieces to those puzzles that need to be fixed. I'm hoping that maybe there could be a housing strategy in place for those families to stay in those communities so that they can work and live where they want to.

THE CHAIR: Thank you. Moving on to the PC caucus. Ms. Sheehy-Richard.

MELISSA SHEEHY-RICHARD: I just want to start off by saying how much I appreciate you sharing such a heartwarming story of your journey to our province. It really moved me. I like to see the inside connections to people in their roles and how great they truly do fit to the jobs that they're doing.

My question is just around the programs that you discussed and the marketing that you launched recently. I was wondering about the work that maybe was being done that would encourage more women and gender-diverse individuals into some trades in our rural communities.

AVA CZAPALAY: Thank you for your kind comment, and also we're really excited about the marketing campaign. There have been real signs of early success. The variety of the inquiries that we're getting is amazing.

I just wanted to mention, before I turn it to my colleague Marjorie Davison, that we're personally responding to the inquiries within 24 hours, and the team is working very hard to make sure that people feel that immediate connection to Nova Scotia. We don't want to let a single inquiry slip through our fingers.

Specific to your question, I'll ask Marjorie Davison from the Apprenticeship Agency to share a few thoughts on it.

MARJORIE DAVISON: Regarding increasing participation of women and equity-seeking groups in the apprenticeship system, the agency recently renewed our framework, Building More Equitable Pathways. Through that framework, we're seeking to champion change ourselves - as we're responsible for the apprenticeship system - lead to some innovation and attract and retain more female apprentices and more diverse apprentices.

We've worked to build the cultural proficiency of our staff and our board, and we're developing curriculum resources to embed in all of our technical training and our other programs, so that we can support the cultural proficiency of our trades workforce. We're really thinking about cultural proficiency of us as the deliverers of the system and of the work environment, where apprentices are hopefully experiencing respectful and inclusion from their co-workers.

We're partnering with a number of community groups such as East Preston Empowerment Academy, the Immigrant Services Association of Nova Scotia, a number of



the First Nation communities and including some organizations such as Aboriginal Peoples Training Employment Commission. Our work there is to deliver culturally-appropriate skilled trades programming.

We've also been operating a Women in Trades pilot - so specific focus on women and diverse women. This has been supported through federal funding to date. The purpose is to address the challenges that women experience in finding and maintaining apprenticeships and helping them to advance their certification. Through the pilot, we've also developed a number of resources. We're using those to support employers to create respectful and inclusive workplaces for women apprentices.

We have had success so far with the strategy. We've increased the number of apprentices from under-represented groups - they represent currently almost 17 per cent of all apprentices - and we've increased the number of women apprentices to almost 8.5 per cent. Those are both starting points around 4 per cent.

We need to do more. We realize we have a lot more to do to support cultural proficiency in our workplaces and our learning environments so that as these women and underrepresented individuals express interest - they want to come into apprenticeship, but many will not complete because of the current experiences, unfortunately. Our effort there is to change that experience so that we can keep them in the system and hopefully move them to certification. I hope that that responds to your question.

MELISSA SHEEHY-RICHARD: That was a fantastic response, thank you. As the first female MLA for the constituency of Hants West, I'm very pleased and happy to hear about the efforts you're making in your marketing to get more women and diversity into our trades. I do see it's a field where women are now starting to feel that, hey, I can be this too. I thank the department for their hard work in acknowledging that.

THE CHAIR: Mr. Ritcey.

DAVE RITCEY: My questions will be directed towards Ms. Czapalay, our deputy minister, and it's around economic opportunities for rural populations. Revitalizing our rural communities is so important to support our economy throughout the province.

Fostering economic opportunities helps attract and retain people in rural areas. What challenges are rural Nova Scotia's larger employers - Michelin, for example - experiencing when it comes to recruitment and retention? What work is being done or planned to address these challenges?

AVA CZAPALAY: I just want to start off by acknowledging that newcomers do fuel our economy. They create new businesses and jobs, they fill labour gaps, they increase our tax base, and they add to the diversity and culture in our communities.

[11:15 a.m.]

Earlier this Fall, I was so pleased to participate in the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Michelin's time here in Nova Scotia. There were a large number of our political colleagues at the event, really celebrating the impact that a company like Michelin has made in the communities in which it works.

During that celebration, I was really struck by Michelin's comments about how they were really here primarily because of the loyal workforce that they had. They felt that Nova Scotians provided the work that they needed to get done and the loyalty to the company and the consistency, and many of the workers were long-term workers. Those are characteristics that Nova Scotians are known for. The company, I think, was really celebrating not only that it had been here for so long but that it had a fantastic experience here.

Like many households in Nova Scotia, I got a Michelin anniversary flyer in my mail and took a look at it. The flyer featured a number of newcomers to Nova Scotia who had chosen to work at Michelin. They arrived with a skill and Michelin saw the skill and hired them to work in their plants and featured them in their brochure, but really I know that it was just an example of a trend at Michelin. Our immigrant newcomers come with a wide variety of skills. They're job-ready, and for companies like Michelin, it's fantastic. A combination of hiring locally and hiring newcomers to produce a workforce that's both diverse and engaged is really important.

DAVE RITCEY: Could you expand on what programs are currently in place to help create economic opportunities in rural Nova Scotia?

AVA CZAPALAY: I'll draw on some of my colleagues as well, but to start with, our office works very closely with our community partners. For example, we have a program called Workplace Initiatives and we work closely with companies throughout Nova Scotia who want to innovate, who want to make sure that their workforce has the skills relevant to their evolution as companies. I'll ask Nancy Hoddinott if she wouldn't mind describing that program for you.

THE CHAIR: Ms. Hoddinott.

NANCY HODDINOTT: I'll highlight a couple of programs in Workplace Initiatives and then a couple of other things that we're doing to support businesses across the province in this area.

We have two programs that we are increasingly seeing some greater uptake for and really a lot of innovations in terms of what employers are using the programs for. One is our Workplace Innovation and Productivity Skills Initiative. We have businesses that are getting into new production lines or innovating in areas and they need some support in

training their employees to participate fully in some new lines of business. We actually subsidize up to 50 per cent of all local training in that area, so we have a number of partnerships with workplaces across the province where we invest that funding.

We also have a program called Workplace Education Initiative where employers who are wanting to do just some basic essential skills - some business communication, some marketing, some sales training with their staff - again, we can partner with them to help co-fund that training with current employees. What we're actually helping an employer to do is build their workforce and to invest in ongoing training of current employees.

The other piece is that we have a program here in Nova Scotia that's quite unique to this province. It's not something that we see across the country. It's our Sector Council Program. It's a program where we invest in sectors, and we fund individuals who oversee some work in those sectors to build things like their recruitment and retention strategies, their HR planning. It is really around having focused work within specific sectors to help employers meet their recruitment needs, to meet their training needs, to ensure that they remain innovative and productive and able to meet their labour market needs.

We know that most businesses in Nova Scotia are small to medium-sized. Some of those organizations lack the internal capacity from an HR perspective to do some of this work, so the sector councils are really focused on helping small to medium-sized businesses meet their recruitment, their talent management, their training needs.

The other piece I think that's important is our Nova Scotia Works initiative. Employers can certainly access Nova Scotia Works offices across the province if they have labour market needs. A particularly innovative initiative in Nova Scotia - again something that you wouldn't see across the country - is our Nova Scotia Works online channel, where we have actually placed those in-person services online. Individuals, including employers, are able to tap into those services at their desk at a computer.

I think that's really important from a rural perspective, from an economic development perspective, as well as from encouraging immigration and individuals to come to Nova Scotia. The kinds of things that people can access now through Nova Scotia Works online are regional profiles about what the economic activity is in regions across the province, what the employers are, what the jobs are. They can search job ads - who is hiring in areas across the province, what the kinds of qualifications are that they're looking for. They can actually work with career practitioners through Nova Scotia Works on the ground, through the online channel to help build their resumes and get their applications in and ask questions.

It's really quite a dynamic service that's available to employers as well as individuals across the province, but also the individuals who may be outside of Nova

Scotia who are wanting to look into and see what kinds of activities are happening in the province.

THE CHAIR: Mr. Ritcey.

DAVE RITCEY: I just have one more last question, and again it comes back to training and supports that are available through your department. There have been some closures in some facilities in communities, such as Scotiabank announcing three recent closures. What is being done to support those residents in those communities and the people who would be looking for work? Like Sheet Harbour, Westphal, and Sydney Mines - those people who are working there and the residents in the community who are really losing out on this - just wondering what supports your department will provide them in the future.

THE CHAIR: Ms. Czapalay.

AVA CZAPALAY: I'd like to ask Ms. Hoddinott to respond to that question.

THE CHAIR: Ms. Hoddinott.

NANCY HODDINOTT: There are a number of supports that staff within my division would actually activate when a business closes in a community. Employment Nova Scotia staff, when they learn of a business closure, reach out to the workplace to ensure that organization understands the services that they have available.

Employment Nova Scotia staff, working with Nova Scotia Works centres, and also with federal Service Canada employees, are able to go on site to provide that overview of what some of the next steps may be. For Service Canada, it would be how you apply for EI.

For Employment Nova Scotia, it would be ensuring that these folks know where the services on the ground are if they're looking for new jobs, where employment opportunities may be, and ensuring they understand that individuals who are unemployed have access to funding programs. ENS can help them: whether they need some retraining support or some specific wage subsidy support, maybe to connect to a new employer, or ensuring they know the breadth of funding that could be available to them to access new employment. Also, connecting them to all of those community connection points - including Nova Scotia Works - where these individuals can absolutely go to look for new employment opportunities in their local area.

THE CHAIR: We have four minutes and 15 seconds left. Mr. Ritcey.

DAVE RITCEY: I'm going to pass it on to my colleague Larry Harrison.

THE CHAIR: Mr. Harrison.

LARRY HARRISON: I'm just thinking way back. Our country would not have even existed without immigrants coming to the new world. The only way our country is going to grow is by continuing to bring in immigrants into our country.

With some of the jobs that are really needed now in our country - and I'm thinking of health care in particular, CCAs, home care workers and so on - are there people out there who are really wanting to come in? Are there quotas on the number of people who can come in to assist us in this?

AVA CZAPALAY: In our marketing campaign, we're just advertising the benefits of living and working in Nova Scotia, and our campaign does target, as I mentioned earlier, health care workers and skilled trades workers, but there are no quotas associated with that. I will ask my colleague Jen L'Esperance, who works in immigration and population growth, to share with you the pathway that someone would follow in order to identify an opportunity and end up working as a CCA here in Nova Scotia.

JENNIFER L'ESPERANCE: We work with employers very closely to understand their needs and ensure that they have a pathway to fill those skilled labour needs within the province. I would highlight our Atlantic Immigration Program. It was a pilot program and it has just become a permanent program. That program in particular has been very successful in attracting people outside of the Halifax area because it is employer-driven.

About 40 per cent of our employers through the Atlantic Immigration Pilot program were outside of the Halifax region. That's in contrast to what's been noted earlier, which is about 85 per cent of newcomers who say that they would like to settle in an urban area like Halifax. About 30 per cent of the applications we supported through the Atlantic Immigration Pilot Program also went to outside of Nova Scotia. Many of the employers that we worked with were people and employers in the health care industry, and they were able to successfully attract and retain newcomers to work as continuing care assistants, registered nurses, and others in the health care industry.

One of the criteria that's been great to help attract is previously, there had been a condition that anyone in a NOC level - which would be a continuing care assistant - would have to work with the employer for six months before we could support them through our program. Now, with our Provincial Nominee Program, as well as the Atlantic Immigration Program, there is no longer that requirement. We're able to attract people from other countries who have the skills that employers need, and they can get a work permit, come and start working right away for that employer, and apply to be a permanent resident of the province.

THE CHAIR: With respect to time, we have about 35 seconds left.

LARRY HARRISON: I would like to thank you for the work that you're doing, because we really do need to bring in as many immigrants as we can - not only to help our population grow but to provide the expertise that we do need in all fields in our country.

[11:30 a.m.]

THE CHAIR: Before our next round of questioning, with respect to time, I think we'd have time to do eight, eight, and eight, and that leaves about six minutes for closing. I'll take it to the Liberal Party. Mr. LeBlanc.

RONNIE LEBLANC: I have a question related to labour shortages. Speaking with a lot of businesses in the seafood processing sector, they're really struggling to find the employees they need to basically remain viable.

I know that I've had a couple of questions focusing on the Atlantic Immigration Program. To meet the short-term gaps, some of them are suggesting to look at a stream such as the agricultural stream, just in a short period of time to bring in some of the employees that they need while we work to bring more immigrants to rural communities. I don't know if you're having discussions with your federal counterparts to try to address those labour gaps.

AVA CZAPALAY: Thank you for the question. The question of how to find workers for seasonal types of work is a critical one, and one that really occupies a lot of conversations from Nova Scotia and within Atlantic Canada.

I'll ask my colleague Jennifer L'Esperance to share with you the latest in terms of those conversations.

JENNIFER L'ESPERANCE: We do work very closely with the sector and individual employers to see how we can help support those critical labour needs. We do have programming that is flexible, and we have created some policy changes just this month for this fiscal year to hopefully create a little bit more flexibility for those employers and their ability to attract the people that they need.

The flexibility comes in the full-time work. Our programs are negotiated with the federal government. There's a requirement that it's a full-time, year-round job, but what we're hearing from employers is that yes, there are full-time, year-round jobs, but there may be some weeks that there would be less than 30 hours, and then the next week there would be significantly more than 30 hours. In the end, it would average out over the year.

Previously, that was not something that we could support through our programs, but we have made the policy changes this year to be able to support that. Now we're having those discussions with employers to see how that will positively impact our labour force, and then what more can we do.

RONNIE LEBLANC: I think that's a positive change. I know for many rural communities who have the fisheries sector as primary source of the economy, it will be a big help.

I'll pass on the rest of the time to my colleague, Mr. Clark.

THE CHAIR: Mr. Clark, you have five minutes.

BRAEDON CLARK: Just quickly, I just wanted to ask about the goal of two million people by 2060. All of us on this call will be long gone, I'm sure, and not doing the jobs we're doing now - I hope for my sake, anyway, in 38 years - but we all agree we want to see that. That would be a massive uptake. About 25,000 people or so a year between now and then is huge.

I know a huge part of that is going to be interprovincial migration, which is about 10,000 last year, as the deputy mentioned, which is fantastic but obviously a significant portion has to be people coming from outside of the country. In the minister's mandate letter, there is a goal to negotiate with the federal government to up the cap, or the immigration numbers, to 1.5 per cent of the population, which would be about 15,000 people. That gets us to our 25.

My question is, are those negotiations happening? What is the likelihood that we'll get there, and when?

AVA CZAPALAY: We do feel very confident that we will get to the goal of two million people by 2060. In fact, we feel like we'll get there a few years early.

We look at a combination of things. One is, as you rightly pointed out, the current momentum in terms of the number of immigrants choosing to come to Nova Scotia and settle here. We also look at the in-migration. There's tremendous momentum there, and we feel like our population growth campaign will capture and build on that momentum, so we'll see even more newcomers coming from rest of Canada.

We also have a tremendous asset in our international student population. Those communities who host universities and community college campuses will know that there's a change. When those international students are on campus, you can feel it in the communities. We're looking at retaining more international students to contribute to the growth here.

We are also looking at retaining more Nova Scotians. Historically, we've had a number of Nova Scotians leave, a number coming in, and that has resulted in a deficit. Now it's finally a positive, and so we want to continue to build on that positive. I mentioned the number earlier: I think it was around 10,000. We want to include more young people and more Nova Scotians staying here.

THE CHAIR: Mr. Clark.

BRAEDON CLARK: That's the only question I had. I just wanted to make one final comment. Just looking at some of the numbers around younger people between 20 and 34. I am still a member of that group, just barely hanging on for a little while longer. It's amazing to see. I jotted this had down because it was so interesting. In 2016-17, between 20 and 34, we had a positive influx of 610 people; in 2020-21, it's 3,845. That's more than six times the increase.

As we all know, those are people who are starting their careers, starting families, doing all these things that will contribute in a really positive way to the economy, to our society, to our culture, to all of these different things. I just want to commend everybody who is on the call here for the work that you're doing. I think it's a really exciting time for the province in terms of population growth and immigration. Success raises its own unique challenges, we know that, but it's a heck of a lot better than the opposite, which is what we were dealing with for a long time.

I'll cede any time I have left, Mr. Chair and thanks, everybody, for your time today.

THE CHAIR: I'll move on to our colleagues with the NDP caucus. Ms. Hansen.

SUZY HANSEN: I'm just going to speak to housing, because that was what I started with the last time and I didn't have a lot of time.

In order to attract and retain people in rural areas, they must have somewhere to live. We know that 19 per cent of households in Nova Scotia pay more than 50 per cent of their income on rent and utilities, and more than 52,000 households are spending over 30 per cent of their income on rent and utilities.

We all know that there is a housing crisis in Nova Scotia, as I stated before. Some of the worst vacancy rates are in areas outside of Halifax, in places like the South Shore, Kings and Hants County. We've heard from rural employers that access to affordable housing is a key barrier to recruiting and retaining the workers there in their area.

My question is: Does your department work together with the Department of Municipal Affairs and Housing to make sure that housing investments are made in areas outside of Halifax? Is there a strategy for that? We want to continue to keep them here in their welcoming communities and their areas in which they feel the most safe. Is there a plan in place for that?

THE CHAIR: Ms. Czapalay.



AVA CZAPALAY: I'll bring in a colleague, probably Marjorie Davison, in just a moment, but I do want to say that we work closely with all of our colleagues across government on this significant issue.

The part that we contribute to the solution is both in terms of attracting people here with our job-ready skill set that can help contribute to developing the housing that we need, and also ensuring that people who are here choose to go into a trade through apprenticeship that will help us have the talent that we need here in Nova Scotia to build that housing. That's the contribution that our department makes to that bigger conversation.

Marjorie, do you have anything else to add to that?

MARJORIE DAVISON: I could just add a little bit about what we are doing to attract or to grow the awareness of apprenticeship with youth. We haven't really talked about that today. We do work in partnership with our Department of Education and Early Childhood Development to ensure that there are youth programs across the province. That includes giving grants to the regional educational centres for career exploration projects, doing outreach, co-operatives in skilled trades, special events.

We have number of relationships with industry associations including the Construction Association of Nova Scotia to provide summer youth apprenticeship jobs, so that we can move them more quickly to apprenticeship.

We've also, with our partner here, Nancy Hoddinott in Skills & Learning, helped to fund the Trades Exhibition Hall. That's a display centre where students can go and learn about the construction sector. We've funded that to go mobile so that there is now a mobile construction experience which travels to junior high schools and communities across the province. The point of that is to give them hands-on experience in careers in the construction sector.

We also fund third parties like Techsploration that introduces female students to careers in the skilled trades. Skills Canada Nova Scotia operates skills competitions in our high schools. We do a lot of work with the Aboriginal community, as well: Mi'kmaw Kina'matnewey, we run an annual youth trade fair, and we fund Summer camps - particularly in carpentry.

We also work with our other youth organizations across the province to provide experiential learning opportunities. This is the way that we're trying to increase awareness about apprenticeship and hopefully bring more youth into skilled trades in general - hopefully supporting the building of housing as that develops as well.

SUZY HANSEN: Thank you so much for your answer. I really appreciate that. I'm glad that there are so many supports and opportunities for young people, and as well for those people that are coming into our province.

I think about it in another way in the sense of, we have families that are moving here in large numbers - do we have places for them to live? Are there spaces for them that are affordable, that will be long-term, where they can see themselves staying in these communities? Right now there's a housing crisis. We want to build more housing, we need more stock, absolutely. As well, we also need to make sure that there are safe places and roofs over the heads of the people who come here and who are here. That's why I say it in that sense.

I'm grateful that there's a lot of learning, a lot of opportunities, and there are a number of pieces and supports for the families that come here. My biggest thing is really, do we have spaces for them? Are they able to have a home? Those are things that keep people here. That would be the tail end of that, so thank you for that.

My next point is access to health care is not the only government service that is patchy outside of Halifax. We know that access to education, housing, road maintenance and employment services can all vary depending on where you live. Is the government working toward a service guarantee so that Nova Scotians know that wherever they choose to settle, they have access to the same services as those in urban areas?

AVA CZAPALAY: I just wanted to quickly comment on the housing piece. I appreciate your comments and your perspective, and we recognize that there is a need for newcomers to have housing in communities. Part of the role of the navigators, by imbedding them into the communities, is to work very closely with local community partners, as well as the settlement providers, to help newcomers find all the services that they need in order to consider settling in a community.

In terms of the services, I think the best answer I can give to that is that by growing our population, we're also growing our tax base. Our planned growth is going to be good for communities, for businesses, and for our future. If we are able to bring people here, their work will fuel our economy, they'll create new businesses, they'll create jobs, they'll fill labour gaps, increase our tax base, and add to the diversity and culture of our communities. I think when all of that coalesces, we'll also see improvements in the quality of services in communities throughout Nova Scotia.

THE CHAIR: Ms. Hansen, we have a minute and four seconds.

SUZY HANSEN: Well, I agree, and I want to say thank you so much for the presentation, and, as well, hoping that we can reach out and connect if we do have any other questions. I think there's a lot here, but at the same time, a lot of it touches on a number of pieces that we are all interested in. Just having connections, to be able to have those conversations, would be wonderful. Thank you so much for your time.

THE CHAIR: Ms. Coombes.

KENDRA COOMBES: I want to talk about connectivity. Many individuals who want to live in the rural areas face a barrier of connectivity. What appears to have not really been contemplated by Development Nova Scotia is affordable internet and cell services. We know they're doing this work to bring connectivity, but I'm talking about affordability, because as we've seen, it has become a necessity for affordable internet.

Are you able to speak to what the government is doing to make these utilities affordable as more people are moving to the rural areas?

THE CHAIR: Order. On that note, moving to the PC Party. Mr. MacDonald.

JOHN A. MACDONALD: I think it was when MLA LeBlanc was speaking, there were some acronyms, which I assume had to do with FSANS or something. Could I please know what those initials mean? Because of course I'm not an Acadian - although I'm sure my learned friend would know exactly what they were - just so that we know what those actual acronyms mean for organizations. Then I'll get to my questions.

NOLAN YOUNG: Ms. L'Esperance.

JENNIFER L'ESPERANCE: Despite my last name, I'm not bilingual, but I will do my best. I believe I mentioned Université Sainte-Anne; CDÉNÉ, which is the Conseil de développement économique de la Nouvelle-Écosse; la FANE, which is the Francophone Association of Nova Scotia; and also CSAP schools I mentioned.

JOHN A. MACDONALD: To get back to my other questions, this is regarding learning skills. It actually will possibly go a little bit different, but the same line as MLA Coombes. Is remote working an opportunity that the province can leverage when it comes to providing opportunities for rural communities, and if so, how? I assume we'll get into the point of what the Province is doing for rural internet and that.

THE CHAIR: Ms. Czapalay.

AVA CZAPALAY: Definitely remote working is an opportunity for Nova Scotia, and we have a remote worker campaign right now - a marketing campaign that is active and it's being led by the Department of Community, Culture, Tourism and Heritage. The idea behind attracting remote workers is that people will come to Nova Scotia for the lifestyle, bringing their job with them and work from anywhere in Nova Scotia, but maybe their employer is a bank or something located elsewhere in Canada.

The remote worker campaign had some initial success last Spring, and so it's being relaunched this Winter to see if there are any folks out there who would like to come and live here in rural Nova Scotia and work from their home. That does connect into being able to work from home and all that provides.

I wanted to mention a couple of initiatives that we do have that support people in terms of Nova Scotians acquiring the digital skills that they need to work from home to access services and possibly work. Perhaps Nancy - would you mind just mentioning the Getting Everyone Online program? Is that under you?

THE CHAIR: Ms. Hoddinott.

NANCY HODDINOTT: It's actually not but we can speak to it. The Getting Everyone Online initiative is a partnership with community organizations, with a number of government departments ensuring that Nova Scotians across the province have access to the internet, but also have the digital skills to access the services they need, whether they're looking for work, wanting to work online, or they want to access learning opportunities. That's something that's just come into being I think during the pandemic, so within the last year or two.

The other piece that we ensure through Skills and Learning - and this comes back to our supports around having a trained labour force in the province. We want to ensure when individuals become unemployed and require upskilling or retraining, if they are eligible for the funding programs that we provide and they're going back to school to learn new things to find new employment, that we actually cover the cost of internet access as well as devices so that they can engage in those training opportunities, and that the internet and the devices are not a barrier to that training. We ensure that funding is provided through our Skills Development Program.

The other piece we've invested in significantly over the last year is in our Nova Scotia School for Adult Learning. That's a program for adults who may not have achieved their high school diploma. As we know, not having a high school diploma can be a barrier to employment. We have providers across the province - again, in rural areas across the province - who provide opportunities for adults to either get their prep and get their GED, or get their credits toward their high school certificate, or to just upgrade essential skills in general.

One of the essential skills that we've invested significantly in over the last year or two is digital skills. We have new programs. We initiated sandbox initiatives with our learning organizations to come up with new and innovative ways that they could reach out to communities and offer programs to update and upgrade individuals' digital skills so they were just more comfortable in an online environment.

That's just a couple of examples of our sort of space in this digital connected piece.

LARRY HARRISON: Has there been any survey done with respect to how the immigrants are doing, if there are any difficulties? Do you check with them in a 12-month period just to see how they're doing? If there are any results from those surveys, are they available to the municipalities and other groups?

AVA CZAPALAY: Thank you very much for that question. I'll ask my colleague Jennifer L'Esperance to respond.

JENNIFER L'ESPERANCE: Thank you for the question. Currently, our connection points are often with the employers, directly from our office. We connect with employers quite often to see how the employment relationship is going, whether or not the skilled worker is continuing to work and continuing to stay.

We also look to see that they are in fact applying for their permanent residence, that they're becoming a permanent resident of Nova Scotia. That's where that retention rate comes. We have a 71 per cent retention rate, which is the highest in Atlantic Canada. In fact, we surpassed Saskatchewan recently as well.

That shows that while we do aspire to retain more, we're looking to increase that retention rate. Even though we're getting more and more newcomers who are arriving each year in Nova Scotia, we're still maintaining that 71 per cent retention rate. Most are staying and continuing to be successful in communities.

THE CHAIR: That would conclude our question period. I'd ask the witnesses if they have any closing remarks.

AVA CZAPALAY: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. I have a clarification and a closing remark. First, the clarification has to do with questions by Ms. Coombes regarding the Nova Scotia Minimum Wage Review Committee. I understand from staff that the April 1<sup>st</sup> increase has been accepted but the rest of the report is still under consideration. My apologies for my previous response.

I really enjoyed the conversation. Frankly, I just want to say that I feel like you're all in - that we're not working in isolation - and that we have a wide variety of perspectives we can learn and benefit from on this important topic. I truly want to thank you for your interest and also for your questions.

I hope that we were able to demonstrate our sincere commitment to growing the population in rural Nova Scotia. It's something we're very passionate about. We're very proud to have that in our mandate letter.

We feel like we have an enormous suite of skills and talents within this department in order to make that a reality. We're also working across government and with communities and local partners to ensure that we are able to continue the momentum that we see - and that we've shared with you today - and that we will see benefits in rural Nova Scotia, as well as all of Nova Scotia, as we continue to benefit from population growth.

I'll keep my remarks very informal and short this time and just thank you for your time today.

THE CHAIR: I'd like to thank the witnesses for coming out. You're more than welcome to log off now if you so choose and we will finish off the meeting with other business, so thank you.

Our next meeting will be Tuesday, February 22, 2022, from 10:00 a.m. to noon. The topic is to be determined. I think we're still lining up witnesses, Ms. Kavanagh.

I believe that's it. Thank you for your patience with my first time as the Chair of a Zoom call.

This meeting is adjourned.

[11:56 a.m. The meeting adjourned.]