

HANSARD

NOVA SCOTIA HOUSE OF ASSEMBLY

STANDING COMMITTEE

ON

HUMAN RESOURCES

Tuesday, February 28, 2023

Committee Room

**Support for Firefighters;
and
Appointments to Agencies, Boards and Commissions**

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HUMAN RESOURCES COMMITTEE

Chris Palmer (Chair)
Melissa Sheehy-Richard (Vice Chair)
Dave Ritcey
John A. MacDonald
Nolan Young
Hon. Tony Ince
Ali Duale
Kendra Coombes
Suzy Hansen

[Dave Ritcey was replaced by Larry Harrison.]
[Kendra Coombes was replaced by Gary Burrill.]

In Attendance:

Gordon Hebb
Chief Legislative Counsel

Judy Kavanagh
Legislative Committee Clerk

WITNESSES

Halifax Professional Fire Fighters Association - IAFF Local 268

Michael Sears, Member; and Nova Scotian Representative, Atlantic Provinces
Professional Fire Fighters Association

Department of Labour, Skills and Immigration

Ava Czapalay, Deputy Minister
Gary O'Toole, Senior Executive Director, Safety Branch

Fire Service Association of Nova Scotia

Greg Jones, President
Rod Nielsen, Past President
Daniel Gaudet, Past President
Jim Roper, Past President



HALIFAX, TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 28, 2023

STANDING COMMITTEE ON HUMAN RESOURCES

10:00 A.M.

CHAIR
Chris Palmer

Vice Chair
Melissa Sheehy-Richard

THE CHAIR: Order. I call this meeting to order. This is the Standing Committee on Human Resources. I am Chris Palmer, MLA for Kings West and Chair of this committee. Today, in addition to reviewing appointments to agencies, boards, and commissions, we will hear from the Halifax Professional Fire Fighters Association, the Fire Service Association of Nova Scotia, and the Department of Labour, Skills and Immigration regarding support for firefighters.

At this time, I would like to ask everyone in the room to please put your phones on silent or vibrate. You may have noticed in your time in the room here that there is construction work taking place around us, and it can be noisy at times. Hopefully, it won't be too much of a distraction. There may be the occasional loud blast or bang without any warning signals; don't get too excited about that. We'll try to give you a warning whenever possible.

I'd like at this point for all the committee members to please introduce themselves, and we'll begin with MLA Sheehy-Richard.

[The committee members introduced themselves.]

THE CHAIR: For the purpose of Hansard, I'd also like to recognize the presence of Chief Legislative Counsel Gordon Hebb to my right, and our Legislative Committee Clerk Judy Kavanagh to my left.

Before we begin with the questioning of our guests today, we will proceed as our Human Resources Committee, to our agencies, boards, and commissions appointments. We'll take care of a bit of business first, and then we'll begin with our questioning in a minute. We'll now pass this over to MLA Young.

NOLAN YOUNG: I have a motion for the Department of Advanced Education. I move to recommend that Allan MacDonald be appointed member of the Acadia University Board of Governors.

THE CHAIR: There's a motion on the table. Is there any discussion?

All those in favour? Contrary minded? Thank you.

The motion is carried.

NOLAN YOUNG: For the Department of Advanced Education, I move to recommend that Christine Bonnell-Eisnor be appointed member of the Saint Mary's University Board of Governors.

THE CHAIR: There's a motion on the table. Is there any discussion?

All those in favour? Contrary minded? Thank you.

The motion is carried.

NOLAN YOUNG: For the Department of Health and Wellness, I move to recommend that Kaothar Bello, William Hatfield, William C. Hart, and Rosanne LeBlanc be appointed members, and that Denise Rooney be appointed Chairman and member of the Nova Scotia Advisory Commission on AIDS.

THE CHAIR: There's a motion on the table. Is there any discussion?

All those in favour? Contrary minded? Thank you.

The motion is carried.

NOLAN YOUNG: For the Department of Justice, I move to recommend that Laura Broz, Lee-Ann Conrod, Paulette Anderson, Tokunbo Omisade, and Jenna Shaddock be appointed members of the Law Foundation of Nova Scotia Board.

THE CHAIR: There's a motion on the table. Is there any discussion?

All those in favour? Contrary minded? Thank you.

The motion is carried.

That concludes our appointments to agencies, boards, and commissions. Are there any other committee members offering any other business in our meeting today? There being no other business, we will end our meeting after the questioning of our witnesses today, and when our guests leave, we'll probably end our meeting at that point in time if there's no other business.

Welcome to all of our guests here today. We're glad you joined us and look forward to the discussion we're going to have. If I could ask each of the members at our table to introduce themselves, we'll then get into opening statements. We'll begin with Mr. O'Toole.

[The witnesses introduced themselves.]

THE CHAIR: Thank you very much. Now, we'd like to offer for those who would like to make an opening statement to do so. I guess we'll begin with Deputy Minister Czapalay.

AVA CZAPALAY: Good morning, I'm very pleased to be here on what's really the eve of a very special anniversary. One year ago this March, government made an important announcement in support of firefighters across Nova Scotia, and made amendments to the Firefighters' Compensation Regulations under the Workers' Compensation Act. These amendments increased insurance coverage of the number of presumptive cancers for firefighters from six to 19.

This was a significant increase. It even introduced coverage of reproductive cancers for female fighters that were previously not covered. This addition was critically important because we know female firefighters have higher rates of reproductive cancers compared to non-firefighters. Coverage was also added for heart attacks that occur within the first 24 hours of responding to an emergency call.

As part of these amendments, government committed to covering initial and annual liability costs to a total investment of \$80.6 million. This means municipalities will not be responsible for additional costs until 2025/26. Following this change, in May of 2022, government made additional amendments to the benefits of firefighters and reduced the latency period for the purposes of insurance coverage of thyroid and pancreatic cancer from 15 years to 10 years.

Nova Scotia is now a leader in providing this coverage. Manitoba and Yukon are the only other two Canadian jurisdictions to provide this level of benefit to firefighters. There are almost 7,000 firefighters in Nova Scotia - approximately 6,000 volunteer firefighters and 600 paid firefighters who protect us and risk their lives to keep us safe. In return, they deserve added protection offered through the workers' compensation system.

This work to improve supports for firefighters in Nova Scotia followed amendments to the Workers' Compensation Act in 2018 when post-traumatic stress disorder presumption was added to insurance coverage for first responders. Both paid and volunteer firefighters were included in this coverage as recognition that the work firefighters do can be impactful. We recognize that government and workplaces must expand thinking of injury as more than just physical. We must consider psychological impact as well.

Committee members, I want to share that the announcements made last year to increase workers' compensation coverage for firefighters was an incredibly important milestone for all of us at the Department of Labour, Skills and Immigration - particularly for those dedicated team members who work in the Safety Branch. Both myself and Minister Balsler were also incredibly proud to see these changes come to fruition. We know the risk firefighters take every day, putting the lives of fellow Nova Scotians ahead of their own. We are proud of any measures we can take to protect them and their families.

We acted on these changes because we are listening to the firefighting community. Ahead of the amendments, we held engagement sessions with firefighters and organizations that represent firefighters, and with municipalities who depend on them. We remain fully engaged with the firefighting community in all facets of our department's mandate.

When it comes to workplace safety, recruitment and retention, and training and upskilling, we're listening and we're collaborating. In fact, this Spring we will welcome the Office of the Fire Marshal to the Department of Labour, Skills and Immigration. The Safety Branch is working to ensure a smooth transition to LSI from the Department of Municipal Affairs and Housing, effective April 1, 2023.

We're pleased to welcome fire safety experts to the Safety Branch. We look forward to working together even more closely supporting the Office of the Fire Marshal's work in the administration of building and fire safety policies, legislation, and guidelines; awareness, education, outreach, enforcement, compliance, and investigations; and technical services for building and fire safety.

Similarly, the Safety Branch is focused on helping Nova Scotians understand the province's occupational health and safety rules. We use Pathways to Compliance to make sure workplaces are compliant with safety rules and regulations, and to promote our shared responsibilities in ensuring safe workplaces.

Our message is simple: Safety is everyone's responsibility. Alignment of these safety mandates will provide new and enhanced opportunities to focus on achieving better safety outcomes for Nova Scotians, and will help us build on the great work that is already happening.

I'm very much looking forward to what we will accomplish next when it comes to addressing the needs of firefighters and fire safety. We want to support them as much as they support us.

To the firefighters here today, thank you for your service. To those with firefighters in their families, thank you for your support.

I look forward to your questions.

THE CHAIR: Mr. Sears, do you have opening comments? Mr. Sears.

MICHAEL SEARS: Good morning. I didn't prepare an opening set of remarks, but what I do want to say is what a privilege it is to be at this committee, to see the commitment from the government to work together with us to get the things we need for our members and the people who rely on them.

Recently, in the last year, we worked with LSI and the Department of Health and Wellness on increasing the coverages to presumptive cancer. It's actually become the gold standard that's wanted across not only Canada but is working its way around the world.

We thank LSI, the Department of Health and Wellness, and the government for standing on their commitments to firefighters. We look forward to understanding more of the challenges that are faced on the career side and on the volunteer side. We face the same thing. Right now, our big battle is cancer and mental health and wellness. It doesn't care if you're a career member or a volunteer member.

The collaborative approach of working together - working together with everybody at this table - is something that we're committed to with the Atlantic Provinces Professional Fire Fighters Association, HPPF, and the other associations involved.

We're glad to be here. Thank you for having us. We look forward to working with you.

THE CHAIR: Mr. Jones.

GREG JONES: I'll echo exactly what Michael said as well. Thank you very much for the opportunity to be here today. This is very important for us to have the opportunity to meet with you folks and collaborate on issues and answer your questions. The fire service, for us, is very important, and the aspect of keeping it moving forward.

Our association, the Fire Service Association of Nova Scotia, is dedicated to leadership and representation of the Nova Scotia fire service, working with government, working with the public sector and citizens of Nova Scotia in developing and evaluating and coming up with policy and programs that we can communicate back and forth.

Throughout the pandemic, as most of you are aware, the fire service has continued to find ways to strategically move forward and maintain our operations regardless of the situation and keep things moving forward. For us, working together and collaboration are key in providing support and in assisting with the growth of our service. We strive as an association to work with all of our partners to make things move forward for us.

Education and understanding of the needs of fire service is extremely important when starting new programs and initiatives. An example of that is approximately a year ago, with the changes to the Workers' Compensation Act, the supports that were provided to the fire service, which were very important.

[10:15 a.m.]

One thing we've learned is that, as an association, when we're involved in the process, we can assist with reducing misinformation and misconceptions that get out to the fire service and to the general public, and maximize on the rollout.

With that being said, there needs to be education and awareness to not only the fire service but the public on the components of new programs and initiatives and how we can blend that in and have things run very smoothly and roll out easily.

Our association does identify a need for an annual government relations day with all members of the Nova Scotia Legislature to give an opportunity to discuss issues that we have, like we are doing today, and find ways to move forward and reduce the challenges that we have.

We've been very fortunate to have the Nova Scotia Joint Municipal Fire Services Committee. This is a committee that is made up of representation from the Fire Service Association of Nova Scotia, the Office of the Fire Marshal, the Nova Scotia Federation of Municipalities, the Association of Municipal Administrators Nova Scotia, and representatives from the Department of Municipal Affairs and Housing. Unfortunately, since the pandemic, we've noticed that the Fire Safety Advisory Council and the committees have not met, which is one point of collaboration that we've not been able to be a part of.

Governance in the fire service in Nova Scotia has been a revolving topic for many years. I've been in the service - as well as my colleagues here with me at the table - for well over 20 years, and we've always talked about governance. There should be a whole-of-government approach to move the fire service governance structure in our province

forward so we have a clear understanding of what it is and what the clear future is for it, as well, including the establishment of a provincial department to have the responsibility for fire service governance.

Thank you for the amendments to the Workers' Compensation Act. It has had a major impact on our fire service in Nova Scotia, and, same as Michael Sears indicated, across our country and even down into the States. People ask questions about it quite often, which is really good to know that we're high level on that as well. However, with that, we need to do some further work to focus on developing a cancer screening program for all firefighters in our province. Often, our firefighters do not have a family physician and they do face delays in cancer screening which, in turn, causes adverse effects on the fire service, especially in a mental health aspect. There needs to be cancer screening for our firefighters.

We've noticed that the mental health program that we currently have available to use in the province - which we truly appreciate - is geared toward a reactive approach. We'd like to turn our minds to having a proactive approach, where from the time individuals join the fire service, they receive mental health training right from the get-go. This will assist them from then, right on for the rest of their life and career.

For us, fire dispatch is a universal requirement that affects the fire service. Every time a request comes in, we need to effectively receive the response request without delay. Currently, fire dispatch within our province may seem to have no concerns. However, in many cases, there are no backup capabilities and there is no ability for overflow coverage or calls to be transferred to an alternate dispatch point for prompt action from a fire department. We need to look at the future. We need to turn our minds to technology changes that the fire service in municipal units may not have the ability to financially support.

I thank you, Mr. Chair and committee members, for the opportunity to speak today. I look forward to your questions, and I also look forward to addressing firefighter mental health in our province, solutions for operational dispatch, and planning and finding ways to work together more collaboratively on all kinds of topics.

THE CHAIR: Thank you, Mr. Jones. I believe that concludes our opening remarks. We're going to get into our question and answer period, for our members to ask you questions.

We will have questions until 11:50 a.m., and the protocol of this committee is by show of hands. I will keep a running list of questioners, and then recognize the members who will ask you the questions. I will allow for a brief follow-up question as long as it's pertaining to the original question. If it's a separate question, I will ask you to hold off on it, but we will allow for a quick follow-up to a question.

With that being said, we will now open the floor to questions, and I will begin with MLA Burrill.

GARY BURRILL: I really appreciate you being here. I think everybody - all parties, all constituencies - was very happy to see the expanded presumptive coverage. Just an across-the-board, very positive move. I think people are particularly happy to see about the dimension that the minister's representing about the expansion to female reproductive malignancies. This is really just wonderful.

Does that mean - and I guess my question is directed to Mr. Sears, Mr. Jones, and Mr. Nielsen - that we now have all the presumptive cancer coverage that is needed? I know that the list has always been expanded. Are there any areas of presumptive cancer coverage that we could hope to have it extended to?

Relatedly, are there other areas of medical coverage? We have PTSD; we have heart attacks. Are there other areas that we now should look to, to improve this gold standard that we've achieved?

THE CHAIR: We can start with Mr. Sears.

MICHAEL SEARS: I would say to this point, we're sitting pretty good. Recently, the International Agency for Research on Cancer, through the World Health Organization, just reclassified firefighting as a Group 1 carcinogenic hazard. As that research continues to move forward, and we advance through our screening and toxicologist's recommendations, there likely will be more at some point. It's hard to say what that is right now, as the science is still evolving.

To your question on mental health, I would definitely echo Mr. Jones' sentiment about there needing to be more education and proactivity. We've got a culture that needs to change, simply put. I can speak on that further if anyone has any other questions, intimately and openly. I think that there needs to be obviously an investment in the mental health aspect, as unfortunately things cost money. It's how to best spend our money with the best return, and investing in all of the people who are in need.

GREG JONES: It's a very valid point. Additional cancers and additional medical coverage are something that's always evolving and will continue to evolve. If we look back at what's happened here in the last five or six years, there's been a lot of new information, a lot of new research has come out, and it's indicative of us to ensure that we keep looking at that. We need to keep researching and evaluating what needs to be changed and what has to be part of our system.

It's very nice to see the coverage that we do have in our province, but we do need to continue to keep that gold standard and keep moving it up as we move on.

GARY BURRILL: We know, too, sometimes it's one thing to have coverage and another thing to be able to effectively, quickly, easily access the coverage. I'm wondering what the experience has been on the ground about accessing the presumptive coverage for malignancies, and also about PTSD - sometimes that can be an issue. Could I direct that to Mr. Sears?

MICHAEL SEARS: With respect to presumptive cancer coverage, we had a member who was not an old man, was very healthy, didn't smoke, didn't drink, and he passed away. It was a pancreatic cancer that took him quite quickly and aggressively. With the increases in coverage, and this member's file being assessed, it was deemed to be a covered cancer. That's our first experience with it, and there have been a couple others since then that have been essentially no delay and recognized.

The second question there you had about mental health - that's a bit of a new one. Currently I'm actually starting to return to work. I was the first claimant from Halifax for occupational stress and post-traumatic stress. It's been a tough road over five months, learning the process as I've gone through it and looking to really help evolve, remove road blocks for other people as they go through it.

It takes a lot, honestly, to step up and go through it. It takes a lot of support from the members around you. It's funny to say, but it was the scariest thing I've ever done. Going into a burning building, no big deal. But taking care of myself and dealing with the impact of what 20 years of firefighting did - it's a lot to evolve there, a lot of room to go.

THE CHAIR: MLA MacDonald.

JOHN A. MACDONALD: Thank you, Mr. Chair. Again, thanks for being here. As you know, I was a member of a fire department for 10 years. You're 100 per cent correct: it's always been: Suck it up. It's got to change, and it's slowly changing. I'm sorry for what you went through, Mr. Sears, but I'm glad you're going to be making it better for the next person going through and removing those blocks. I think FSANS and your organization help out the province and all of the firefighters.

I was fortunate enough to be there last year when they made the announcement of the new covered cancers. What I want to know is, can you share what type of actions it means for firefighters? Like, what are the firefighters not going to have to deal with? To be honest, I'm happy that in the last year I haven't seen a GoFundMe, or we haven't had to do another auction to help a family out. Can anybody there explain how that's helping out?

GREG JONES: Thank you for the question and thank you for the point around actions for firefighters. I will say that it does make a big difference. For any firefighter who has to go through cancer-related illness, PTSD and other mental health illnesses, the fact that that coverage is there gives us the ability to reach in, get access to it, and have comfort

that we're going to be financially viable throughout the event. The action of that happening has made a big impact.

I know for many members who I speak with - not only through our association but locally, through my department - it's made a big difference. The GoFundMe part has gone away, thank God. It has made a true impact and difference for all of us.

THE CHAIR: MLA Ince.

HON. TONY INCE: By the way, I want to say thank you to you all for your service - so much so.

Given the current climate that we all are facing with labour shortages, can you expand on that for us? What's happening? How are things for you in the fire services with regard to getting new members? Maybe if you can give me an idea of how long it takes for that new member to go from the beginning to the end?

THE CHAIR: Was that question directed to Mr. Jones? Or anyone on the panel?

TONY INCE: Anyone.

THE CHAIR: Who'd like to take a stab at that first?

GREG JONES: Thank you very much for that question. Labour shortage, same as any other workplace in Nova Scotia, the fire service has the exact same problem. I can tell you through information from our members and various departments, it is hard to get members to come out and join and become a member of the fire departments. There's a lot of work done - boots on the ground by the departments - to reach out and try to find individuals and encourage them to join.

From the time someone joins the fire service to when they are 100 per cent able to do everything - that could take forever. The amount of training that we take and the number of different hazards and risks we deal with that we train for could take forever. But to get someone straight off the street, to get them into so they could do just basic firefighting, just basic exterior stuff, we're looking at a year to two years.

It does take a fair amount of time, but within the fire service - and it's traditional, we've always done this - we make sure we train our members with the ability to get them out the door to start at least providing service.

The labour shortage has been an issue for us. COVID-19 has had a big impact on the fire service. We did lose quite a few members during COVID-19 for the simple fact that other things happened in their lives. They didn't have to go to the fire hall every day.

It's been on the fire departments to find ways to encourage folks - to get them back in the seat and get them back to work.

TONY INCE: Along with that, I've had some women in the community ask about hiring women in the service. Can you give me an idea of how that's going?

[10:30 a.m.]

GREG JONES: I can only talk for the information I have on that. We're going to have to go out and find some more information on it and bring it back to you on that point, but I can tell you that females within the fire service in our province and across Canada, the numbers have increased over the last few years. Regardless if you're male, female, or what ethnic background you are, the fire service is very diverse. Diversity, for us, is very important to increase that. There has been an increase of females in our service, and we want to see lots more.

NOLAN YOUNG: I'm not sure who to direct this question to, but I'm wondering: How does Nova Scotia compare to other provinces when it comes to protecting our firefighters?

THE CHAIR: A lot of glances back and forth. (Laughter) You're in the middle, Mr. Sears, (Laughter) so we're going to allow you to take the first answer to that one.

MICHAEL SEARS: How do we stack up against other provinces? I would say right now, obviously, with the presumptive cancer legislation, we're right up there in the top. I speak with one of my counterparts in the BC Professional Fire Fighters Association, and I would say we're lagging quite far behind in terms of mental health - education, resources, training, access to these. B.C. has invested quite a bit of money, and they've partnered with the medical faculty at the University of British Columbia to specifically target issues faced by emergency responders. In that instance, it's pretty specific to firefighters.

They do have a lot more resources, and resources bring, obviously, money that goes with them. That's a component that we've got to fight against here. There's a willingness there, and, again, across the provinces to share information. As my friends beside me from the Department of Labour, Skills and Immigration can attest to, when we were doing presumptive cancer, it was really good to work jurisdictionally across, and share all the information and share all the materials so that we weren't reinventing the wheel. I don't think we need to in this instance, either.

THE CHAIR: Is there a follow-up? Okay. MLA Harrison.

LARRY HARRISON: I have had the privilege of watching Rod Nielsen operate for the last 40 years, and I know his commitment to the training and to being a first responder. I want to ask a question on the Public Safety Personnel online therapy program

for first responders. That's been about a year now in place. I'm just asking: How are members made aware of the resource, and how is that working out?

MICHAEL SEARS: If I could, is that PSPNET that you're referring to?

LARRY HARRISON: Yes, it is.

MICHAEL SEARS: Thank you for the question. I've spoken quite a bit with Dr. Schneider at the Canadian Institute for Public Safety Research and Treatment, and it takes time to get the information out, it takes time for people to understand how to use it. I would say, in terms of what I've heard from feedback from some members so far, the information that's there is really good but it's more geared toward the education side and not so much if you're in crisis, going to the website to try to navigate through. That's where, I think, the disconnect seems to be from what I've heard from feedback, but it's like anything: With an additional resource and more info out there, it's a step in the right direction but nothing's linear when it comes to firefighter mental health. Something that works for me might not work for Mr. Jones. It's creating those layers of available material, I think.

GREG JONES: PSPNET, for us, about a year ago - well, less than a year ago - Dr. Schneider did come meet with our association at one of our meetings. Lately, we have been working with Dr. Schneider to find a way to get out in the field and actually do an educational component with the fire service. We have some work in place right now with him on that, and hopefully within the next few weeks, that'll be rolled out in more detail to the fire service. In a few weeks, we're going to have our annual conference in Truro, and he will be speaking at our conference to start building that education piece as well.

THE CHAIR: Our next three questions will come from MLA Burrill, MLA Duale, and MLA Sheehy-Richard.

GARY BURRILL: I wanted to ask Mr. Nielsen and Mr. Jones about the long-standing issue of how various municipalities are able to provide uneven levels of insurance to their fire service people. There's always an issue about life insurance; I'm presuming it must be true also of disability insurance, other benefits.

I know with the Workers' Compensation Board coverage, improvements have been made, but I wonder if you could comment on how this remains an issue and what might be the road to making improvements, what the Fire Service Association of Nova Scotia is calling for.

THE CHAIR: Mr. Nielsen.

ROD NIELSEN: That's been ongoing for many years. I do see some improvement in it. We did have a pilot project earlier on with Elmsdale Fire & Emergency Services to put a component together that covers the off-duty, because WCB only covers on-duty. That

pilot project went very well to understand what the coverage would mean, and it includes mental health and other disabilities, and it does include some life insurance.

To build on that, we are just in the process of trying to figure out what the next step is, but always our challenge is, we're dealing with 49 municipalities. How do you get it even across without provincial guidance or whatever? That is our real challenge, to get rid of the variability across the province.

THE CHAIR: MLA Duale.

ALI DUALE: My question would be to the deputy minister. I'm just learning this morning the transition of the Office of the Fire Marshal to the Department of Labour, Skills and Immigration. That's actually good news for me, because I see the link. In terms of the growth of this province, this government has the intention to double our population. Because of that reason, we need to adopt that growth.

Could you give the committee the background of switching the Office of the Fire Marshal from the Department of Municipal Affairs and Housing to your department?

AVA CZAPALAY: Regarding the transfer of the Office of the Fire Marshal to our department, the Office of the Fire Marshal was in our department for many years - I'll say 80 years, maybe. Then it went to the Department of Municipal Affairs and Housing, and now it's coming back.

As you alluded to, we have a shared safety agenda, and we feel that it will be an excellent fit. The Office of the Fire Marshal feels the fit is there, as well as Mr. O'Toole's branch feels the fit is there, so we're excited to welcome them back and to see what synergies we can jointly work on to ensure that the safety message is front and centre.

You mentioned our growing population, and of course, growing our population to two million by 2060 does require the safe and welcoming workplaces that I've mentioned previously to this committee to retain people here. People will want to feel safe; they'll want to feel like they have the services that provide that safety, including fire services, and the good news is the expanded tax base will also support the expansion of fire services.

I'm looking forward to the transfer of the Office of the Fire Marshal - more to come on that.

ALI DUALE: Do you think there will be any hiccups or difficulties to switch from the Department of Municipal Affairs and Housing to your office? We know most of the fire services are run by municipalities - especially small, rural communities? Are you expecting any conflict within that change of structure?

AVA CZAPALAY: We're just moving the Office of the Fire Marshal, and we've been looking at this potential for many months now, anticipating what hiccups might be there, and how to overcome them. We've addressed all the points that are obvious to us, so there will be no change in FTEs, no change in budget.

The transition itself will be very smooth, and I have confidence in Mr. O'Toole and his team, as well as the team at the Office of the Fire Marshal, that they'll be able to address any potential challenges that emerge.

THE CHAIR: MLA Sheehy-Richard.

MELISSA SHEEHY-RICHARD: I just wanted to touch a little bit more on the coverages. Of course, when it was expanded, I was pleased to see the inclusion of both the variant and cervical cancers for female members. I just want to know if you could share with the committee any feedback you might have received from your female members with regard to that expanded coverage.

MICHAEL SEARS: I would say that in Halifax specifically, there have been a lot of different tactics with outreach, recruitments. With our female members, the numbers have gone quite high, especially comparatively across the country. When we speak to our female members and listen to what it is that they have to say about things that concern them, when it comes to the cancer legislation increases that then cover them, the feedback we received is very positive. It's just one less thing to think about whether you're fighting a house fire or a car fire - any other exposure to carcinogens. Right now, we know it's actually our bunker gear, which is a big fight that we're going against. To have these members who are new to fire fighting feel that they're covered and supported, and echo that back to us is great. Thanks to all of you for putting it in place.

MELISSA SHEEHY-RICHARD: I just have a quick follow-up, if it's okay. I do know, even in my small rural community, of a member who has struggled as well. I just want to know a little bit more on the same point. Could you share with us how many firefighters - female members - might have been impacted by this change? Do you have any numbers on that?

MICHAEL SEARS: Right now, part of what we're advocating for with early detection in cancer screening - we don't have those numbers. We know that they're there anecdotally, but now it's time to prove them and we can't prove them without access to screening. To answer your question, I wish I could. The reality is there are probably people walking around who are sick and don't know it, who are going to get to the point where they then get symptomatic and they're going to be too late to treat. That's why when we talk about the access to cancer screening, access to physicians, that's the key we're trying to get out in front of.

THE CHAIR: Our next round of questioners will be MLA Hansen, MLA MacDonald, and MLA Young. We'll go to MLA Hansen.

SUZY HANSEN: I love the fact that listening to the people who are doing the work on the ground is really important. What I'm hearing is preventive measures: making sure that we have this information early so that we can at least address them or acknowledge them when they're happening so that we can continue to do the work, and you all can continue to do the hard work that you do every day.

Our caucus has been advocating for changes to the occupational health and safety legislation that would see it include psychological health and safety. This would mean an employer has a responsibility under the law to take steps to protect employees from psychological injury. Nova Scotia is the only jurisdiction that does not have this protection. My question is to the members: Would this make a difference for firefighters?

[10:45 a.m.]

MICHAEL SEARS: Absolutely. Right now, what happens across different provinces - and even through some of the states with colleagues that I speak with - is when a member finally puts up their hand and asks for help, it turns into a hot potato or a ping pong match of whose responsibility it is. What I personally believe is that if the member received the injury from doing the work that the employer hired them to do, then that employer plays a large role in it. It's simple, but how do we get there? I think this legislation and potential changes would be a start.

JOHN A. MACDONALD: In 2010 when I joined, 160 hours, all on weekends, nine and a half months. I'm sure it's longer now because I'm sure there's been additional training - before I was granted the access to be able to go into a burning building. It's a lot of training, and I know for - that's what I would call Level 1 trained. Halifax would even go further than that.

The government announced \$3.5 million, which was \$10,000 to every fire department - volunteer and First Nations. I'd just like to know if anybody has a list of how it helped the department, and if there are examples of some things that people were able to purchase or do for their members with that money.

GREG JONES: That \$3.5 million did make a big difference for volunteer fire service and Indigenous fire service across our province, and search and rescue as well. It was very important that we had the ability to get those funds. A lot of our rural fire departments were struggling during COVID-19. As you can imagine, most of our departments across our province do fundraising breakfasts and dinners, boot drives and so on and so forth. COVID-19 took that ability away.

That \$10,000 gave them the ability to have the funds to support their membership in numerous ways. There's not one example I could give that's a solid example of exactly how they did it, but every department benefited from that fund, especially around the social aspect of their members and the morale boost as well.

THE CHAIR: MLA MacDonald for a follow up?

JOHN A. MACDONALD: No thank you, Mr. Chair.

NOLAN YOUNG: My question would be to Deputy Minister Czapalay. Are you able to speak more about the work between government departments to ensure that firefighters' needs are being addressed?

AVA CZAPALAY: Thank you for the question. Perhaps I'll start and ask my colleague Mr. O'Toole to embellish my remarks.

I'll just use the example of the expanded cancer coverage and the fact that our team works very closely with the Department of Health and Wellness, the Department of Municipal Affairs and Housing, as well as the Workers' Compensation Board - and our firefighter friends as well - to determine what the appropriate response was in terms of making recommendations to government. The collaborative approach that was mentioned in the opening remarks is very much there. It's really important in terms of coming up with innovative solutions that provide the best possible support to our firefighting community.

I'll just see if Mr. O'Toole has anything else to add.

THE CHAIR: Mr. O'Toole.

GARY O'TOOLE: That collaboration is really important, obviously. You've heard Mr. Sears and Mr. Jones speak to enhanced screening for firefighters earlier in their remarks. It might not fall in the domain specifically of LSI in terms of health care, but we're happy to take those issues and work with our government colleagues across departments to raise issues and identify those for our colleagues in other departments where it's helpful.

SUZY HANSEN: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I'm glad my name got called really quickly.

Our caucus has been advocating for a centralized registry of AEDs so that a dispatcher can direct people in an emergency to the closest device. The Heart and Stroke Foundation of Canada has also asked for this.

I'm going to ask the members again: Would this make a difference for firefighters and the people they serve, to have access sooner?

ROD NIELSEN: I've been on the stakeholders committee with EHS as medical first responder for a number of years. We've been following this and dealing with it. Would it help? Any easier access for the public to be able to access AEDs is definitely a benefit.

One part of the program they're supplementing is to actually put first responders - so if you're an off-duty firefighter or public who can respond, know where the AEDs go. There's some software and some apps that are in the background to run that.

As far as the fire service, the benefit would be if there's a difference in response time. If they can improve the response time for that person to get care, then the firefighter, that fire department that's arriving, it's definitely a benefit because it's going to help the patient.

As far as assisting the fire department personally or financially, it doesn't make a big difference, but it will make the difference to the patient.

ALI DUALE: My question would be - Mr. O'Toole, with your branch, I'm just wondering, are there any fire prevention initiatives that your office is either looking for or involved in?

GARY O'TOOLE: Not immediately or directly that I can think of, but I would say more generally that our branch is responsible for compliance with respect to the Occupational Health and Safety Act and the Technical Safety Act, which are not directly fire-related but could be, depending on the nature of the work that's being carried out on any given job site in the province.

If a safety officer, for example, encountered something from a work safe perspective that included fire or fire prevention, certainly that would be in scope for us. The addition of the Office of the Fire Marshal to our team in April - there will be all kinds of opportunities for us to leverage the skill sets and expertise. Often, we're in very similar places for very different reasons and with very different skill sets and expertise, but in the same place. There will be opportunities for us going forward to leverage the expertise across our Occupational Health and Safety officers, our Technical Safety compliance officers, as well as the Office of the Fire Marshal going forward. We think that this alignment will be a great addition to our safety mandate and give us opportunities to identify issues maybe that we wouldn't have before.

ALI DUALE: I'll be quite honest, - just giving my own perspective coming from the fire service background. As my colleague Mike has mentioned, sometimes the issue of the fire service becomes that hot potato. Nobody knows who's responsible for what - municipal, provincial, this department, that department. I'm glad to get this information today. This office is joining - it's actually a good thing for me, in my perspective.

I'd like to see these initiatives being brought under one department so things don't get lost. I look forward to seeing what these new initiatives and the relationship of this office will bring to your leadership. Thank you for your answer.

MELISSA SHEEHY-RICHARD: I just want to touch a little bit more on how important it is, the \$10,000, as you made clear about the importance, especially in rural Nova Scotia, because the breakfasts and the car washes and all of that good stuff that members also work towards buying new equipment and whatnot. Can you share with us why it is so very important to continue to support firefighters in their facilities?

Earlier this month, I was able to give out some Platinum Jubilee Medals and a couple of my recipients were volunteer firefighters. If I had my way, I would have liked to have presented everybody with a medal that day. They do so many things for our community, not just answering the call, but all of the things that build a community. Without volunteers, there really isn't community - so if you could just elaborate on why it is so important for all those other elements as well.

GREG JONES: Thank you for bringing up that topic. The first thing I'll say on the \$10,000 that each department received, the best part of it all is that there are no strings attached. The department had the ability to take those funds and use them as they so required for their members, which was truly important.

I will say the volunteer fire service - when you think of volunteers, a volunteer firefighter, our aspect is, they get up in the middle of the night, they go to a call with a moment's notice, they leave their family, they leave their home and do what they need to do. They also leave their workplace. Think of how many workplaces that 7,400-plus volunteer firefighters in our province leave their workplace every day and go to fire scenes to deal with situations.

The support that a fire service receives around that funding and around acknowledgements like with the Queen Elizabeth II's Platinum Jubilee Medal makes a big impact, not only morale-wise, but also on the ability and the acceptance of the fire service in our province. We have one of the provinces in Canada that has the biggest base of volunteer fire service, and we're very lucky to have that. If we didn't have that, it would be completely different in the cost and so forth that would be there.

Each and every day - and I know one of the other members mentioned earlier, when he served the 160 hours he had to do, I can tell you, the folks in my department, they do over 200. Many other departments - my colleagues could tell you from across the province - do well in excess of that. So the supports that we do receive, and the acknowledgement that we do receive for what we do, is really important regardless of what the situation is.

The final point I'll say on it is, when you think back to last Fall with Hurricane Fiona, a lot of the career and volunteer firefighters in our province dropped everything.

Hurricane Fiona was our number one priority, same as with many other provincial departments and other groups. The support that we received after that was also really important to us, and the supports that we received before that also assisted us with having a morale base to make sure that happened.

THE CHAIR: Our next three questioners will be MLA MacDonald, MLA Harrison, and MLA Burrill.

JOHN A. MACDONALD: This is going to be for Mr. Sears, so nobody has to guess. For the adding of the presumptive - you mentioned that it was a process between Halifax fire, FSANS, and the government. Can you explain how that progressed and how you were able to get it done so quickly?

MICHAEL SEARS: It actually began, I think, in 2017 with a bill that was placed on the floor through the NDP. Through that, it kind of evolved. It went, again, all over the place, back and forth, here and there. It ended up going through an election cycle.

When we worked together with FSANS members, LSI, and the Department of Health and Wellness, from the professional service we brought another gentleman in from Manitoba, Alex Forrest. Alex is essentially the - in our world, we look at him as kind of the foremost firefighter cancer expert coming from our side. Mr. Forrest speaks in New Zealand and Australia. He's got observer status with the International Agency for Research on Cancer in France.

For us to have someone like him to then look at the specifics to professional service - for instance, look at the growth in Halifax, and we look at how the fire service has not grown to match the growing city. Our members are working thousands of hours of overtime per year at straight-time hours, and the exposures that they get are exponential. So from our side, to be able to bring that forward to our colleagues at LSI and then to work with FSANS members and look at the unique exposures - transporting of gear, washing stations, exhaust extractors in the buildings themselves - it's uniquely different issues, but it all affects us together.

To bring all of that together in an organized manner, to answer questions that people have that aren't in our field, took a lot of time. But through that - you know, I keep hearing the words collaborative approach, and that's what it really is. It takes a village. And it really did, to get that legislation through. We had a commitment from government, we had a lot of allies on all parties, and we had a willingness to get this done, because it was needed. It's required.

That was Step 1, but now we know that our members are sick and afflicted, and now it's moving toward the detection phase. It will take time, but eventually it'll start to come down. There are a lot of different metrics involved.

THE CHAIR: I believe, Mr. Gaudet, you'd like to answer as well?

DANIEL GAUDET: Just to add to that, I was president at the time when this was going down and Brendan reached out. The resources that they had already done all their homework - it was mentioned earlier about reinventing the wheel. There was no sense in us reinventing the wheel. All we had to do was support what was going on. They had the resources and they had done all the homework, so for us, it was a no-brainer to just support them 100 per cent.

I still talk to Brendan - I emailed him a couple of weeks ago, actually. The contact is still there. It was good to work in partnership to move something of such importance forward.

I just wanted to add that.

[11:00 a.m.]

LARRY HARRISON: This is going to be a two-part question. It may be hard to answer. I'm not sure. But we are in the business of trying to make our province better in all kinds of ways. If you had just a really open mic here, how do you see the future of fire departments? What will that look like?

THE CHAIR: Sorry, that's to Mr. Jones?

LARRY HARRISON: Anyone who would like to answer that question.

THE CHAIR: That's a big question. You only have about 50 minutes at the most.

Mr. Jones, we'll give you the microphone.

GREG JONES: That's a very good question. I could talk for days on that subject, but I won't today.

THE CHAIR: Fifty minutes.

GREG JONES: I know. (Laughter) Thank you, Mr. Chair - appreciate it.

What I will say is that the future of the fire service in our province, the biggest impact is around governance. How is the fire service going to be governed in our province? In Nova Scotia, we are one of the provinces that the fire service doesn't have one component of government that we go to directly - whether it be a fire commissioner or whatever. We're the one province that doesn't have that.

One thing that does happen with not having that, it does not have a clear definition of how the fire service will move forward in the future. The way it is right now, it's open to interpretation by the fire service, how they'd like to evolve and move through, but without having that coordination piece or collaborative effort around it, there's really - it's kind of an open-ended answer, to be very honest. I hate leaving open-ended answers because for a simple fact that the future of the fire service is ever changing. Strategically, we always change and adjust to whatever the current environment is, and we need to have a component that will coordinate all that and push it forward for the future.

ROD NIELSEN: To add to that, with 49 different municipalities that are actually the ones that put the fire service in place here in the province, the connection with the Office of the Fire Marshal does not have anything to do with operations. To that end, I think it always comes back to standards. What do the municipalities need for standards or guidelines on how to put the fire service in place - actively in place - and to prepare for the future?

As we try to look at this province as we amalgamate or - I guess you don't like that word when it comes to municipalities, but the fact is, we need to be able to work together. There are small departments within the province that are totally lost financially, totally lost with guidance. Until we fix that, there won't be a future for some of those fire departments.

GARY BURRILL: Deputy Minister Czapalay, I wanted to ask about the funding of the expanded presumptive coverage. Our understanding is that municipalities in coming years are expected to be picking this up - I think 2025-26. But we have heard from a few different angles this morning about the difficulty of the uneven ability of municipalities to fiscally carry out the responsibilities they have to their local fire services. Does this, in your view, point to a need for there to be some provincial effort to cover some of that for those municipalities for whom this will be difficult, or is there any planning along those lines?

AVA CZAPALAY: We're always learning. I've already taken a couple pages of notes this morning. I appreciate the dialogue and the conversation.

As I mentioned, the Province is covering the liability cost for the next few years. That total cost is \$80.6 million. The ongoing cost would be about in the range of \$4.4 million, and municipalities would take on that cost starting in 2025-26. That was part of the discussion when we expanded the coverage, and we had that consultation with the municipalities. That's where things stand right now.

GARY BURRILL: But would it not be true that there are municipalities that can take that cost on, and there would be municipalities for whom - their ability to do that is very compromised? Is there not a role for the Province with that second group of municipalities?

AVA CZAPALAY: In the Department of Labour, Skills and Immigration, we don't deal directly with the municipalities in terms of their budget or anything like that, but the conversation today is important and it's one that will continue our conversation with the municipalities and the firefighters who are with us.

THE CHAIR: Thank you. MLA Young is next, then MLA Hansen.

NOLAN YOUNG: One year ago, the government made changes to the tax credit for volunteer firefighters, acknowledging that the pandemic made it challenging to maintain regular schedules, but it did not alter the ongoing commitment of the volunteer firefighters and search and rescue teams to keep Nova Scotians safe. How many firefighters benefitted from this change? What has the feedback been from your membership?

THE CHAIR: I almost called you MLA Jones. Mr. Jones. (Laughter)

GREG JONES: Thank for the question, for sure. The tax credit for us in the fire service for the volunteer component, everybody in the volunteer fire service benefitted from that. During COVID-19, which is different from regular practice - we always have the ability to meet the requirements for training, attendance, and responding to calls with the hours of requirement.

Unfortunately, during COVID-19, we couldn't do that. By doing our meetings virtually and all that, we could count the meetings, but it wasn't the same. You couldn't hold a virtual meeting that went three and four hours, or eight hours to hold a full training event to fully keep everybody's attention. By having that change a year ago, it did give the ability for the fire service to also continue to use that tax credit, which did make a big difference right across the board for our 7,400.

THE CHAIR: MLA Hansen, MLA Duale, and then MLA Ince.

SUZY HANSEN: We know that being a first responder is very difficult these days and it has been for a long time - it's not just these days - especially with the strain on our emergency health system and paramedics. Can you talk about - and this is to the members as well - the impact of the health crisis on firefighters and as first responders?

ROD NIELSEN: Yes, that one's dear to my heart. The result of that is it means longer time on scene for some of our firefighters for those medical calls. Of course, that also means the care that we have to provide for a longer period of time. Our firefighters are trained for that, so it's not that question. It is the fact of being able to have good information come back so that you know how long they're going to be.

For an example, just a couple of weeks ago, we got a call for a person who was short of breath, has a cancer history, and we were originally told less than 30 minutes for arrival of paramedics. That turned into just under two hours, but during that, we were able

to communicate back to the dispatch centre to tell them that the patient - so hopefully we can be comforted that somebody else took the call for somebody who was in worse condition. What it means to the firefighters though, is the fact that it is stressful. Here we are, trying to give comfort to the patient and family for extended periods of hours.

Also, what we end up dealing with is paramedics who are under stress. That stress gets shared. It compounds it. Whatever we can do to try to fix our systems, the firefighters will definitely appreciate it. Sadly, we've had some fire departments stop giving that service, so I think that's another key note. Some departments just can't give that kind of commitment, and like Greg said here a while ago, we leave our jobs. To leave a job for two hours for a medical call does not seem reasonable.

MICHAEL SEARS: Uniquely, my career is in the city. When I hear long times on scene for fire crews who are tied up at a medical call - and we do have quite good training and we've got good equipment with us - the issue that we have is where our city, the way we're staffed and deployed, if there's a fire truck tied up doing a medical call, then there's no fire truck in that zone. The longer that health crisis goes on where there's a shortage of paramedics available to respond - right now we're taking up a bit of that slack, but at the cost of being able to provide fire response.

In town, it's not uncommon to go half an hour or 40 minutes, or even longer in some of our outlying areas and communities. I think that's something that, when you pick up the phone and call 911 and you need help, you don't want to hear it's going to be 40 minutes or an hour and a half or that we don't have someone to send. It does compound over. Then we talked more about the exposure to the members. With increased times on scene, increased depending on the nature of the call itself, it can be quite an exposure. And it's then over and over and over again.

ALI DUALE: This question will be Mike's. Nobody mentioned his name.
(Laughter)

First of all, I want to thank all of you for the service that you provide for our province and our communities. I am grateful for that.

Secondly, Mike, knowing you long enough and being a champion of the fire services, especially when it comes to mental health issues, I commend you on your courageous personal decision to admit and to become an example and to encourage your colleagues that it's okay to say: I'm not okay. It takes a lot. I know we have a tradition of being heroes, but I really believe that at the end of the day, we're human beings and we have feelings. Sadly, we have families who are depending on us, so if we're not well, there's a ripple effect. So I commend you for this.

What I'd like to know this morning is, being invested in this subject matter long enough, what the government can do in order to help firefighters pertaining to mental

health. Oftentimes, we act when something bad happens, but I really believe we do have the opportunity to prevent this from happening before people take their lives.

Please, could you give the committee what are the needs of the firefighters, specifically mental health issues?

MICHAEL SEARS: It's a big one. I would say, previous to the question that we spoke about - about potentially a change in legislation of who's responsible - that's a big component right there. Once we determine that, then it goes, okay, well, now how do we fund what's needed?

It's easy to say, well, we need education. What does that look like? How do you do it? Do you pull crews in off shift? Do you bring in volunteer members from their day-to-day? How do we align that with availability of resources, and then who is passing out the curriculum? How do we make it so that it's relevant, so that it's partnering with, in my opinion, some of the different organizations and foundations across the country that are doing great work, independently funded? They have teams of psychologists and clinically trained individuals who understand how to put us back together after we get to that point. So it's working with them to sort of reverse-engineer it.

In terms of funding, it's huge - funding and access to clinicians when you need them. Whether it's recruit training on the volunteer side or career recruit training on the professional side, it's taking the time to really build a strong foundation under the members when they first enter the fire service, regardless of career or volunteer, to educate them on the unseen hazards that they're going to face and then how to recognize it. I think there need to be family programs so that the family members around their firefighter can detect and see the changes.

You've known me for almost 20 years. I've lived by myself for most of that time. It took a while for people to see that there was something going on, and it took a while to address it. I think having that conversation of normalizing - no one would talk strangely about: Oh, I rolled my ankle last week. It would be: I rolled my ankle, who cares? But with this stuff, there's such an apprehension. You and I both know people who really could use some help, but for whatever reason, they don't come forward to get it.

It's kind of a long answer. It's a big question you've asked. I'm definitely willing to go further on it if you require.

THE CHAIR: MLA Duale for a quick follow-up.

ALI DUALE: I really believe it is something that needs to be paid attention to, but what I gather from your testimony is there is a need for legislation. There is a need for change. What that looks like, I don't know, but what I'm gathering from you today, within this committee, there is a need to change the structure - how we look at the fire service and

what needs to be done. I'm assuming that it's also accepted for the other guests who are here. Am I correct? Mr. Jones?

[11:15 a.m.]

GREG JONES: Yes. That is very correct. For us, prevention is golden. I've been at this, same with Mike, for 20-plus years, the same as the rest of my colleagues. When we started, there was no conversation around mental health. There was no pre-education for it. I think that's a component that's been missed. We need to have the pre-education component. We need to prepare members right from the get-go and have the information to reduce that stigma and move forward. We have to have that.

TONY INCE: Given the current challenges that are evident with climate change, can you speak to - any one of you - the challenges that you have fighting forest fires or even with new materials in buildings that are probably making it very challenging for you to fight fires?

GREG JONES: Very good question. I will tell you that, in my career, building materials have vastly changed. The products that simple tables and chairs are made of have changed. Fire develops a lot faster. The buildings that fire develops in, and vehicles, burn completely different than they did 20 years ago.

Climate change for us does have a major impact. The fire service strategically will make changes no matter what. We'll make it work and we'll deal with situations. The problem is that, as our climate changes and evolves over time, it's more work for us to be involved in. When we go back and look at Hurricane Fiona last year, for the fire service, that was a big deal. It didn't affect every individual fire service in our province, but it did affect the ability of what we had to do and what we brought to the table. As most of you have seen, and others would have seen, the fire service - regardless of volunteer or career or composite, we all came up to the plate, we did what we had to do, and we got the job done.

Climate change always has an impact. We always take the time to have attentiveness to the subject and ensure that we're prepared for it. As simple as electric vehicles seem to be, and I know my colleague Mike and the rest of them agree, electric vehicles scare us, because the technology has changed so much in the last 10 years. Now they're talking about a new change three years out. For a fire service, even though it may not seem to be an issue that affects our environment and our climate, it does at the end of the day. The ability for us to deal with those fires is immense. It takes forever to deal with electrical fires.

To answer your question properly, it changes all the time, and we have to be prepared to meet that challenge no matter what.

JOHN A. MACDONALD: We talked a lot about training. I'd just like to know if you could give me your feedback on the effectiveness of the insurance levy to help with some training offset and the effect on members. It looks like Mr. Jones is ready to deal with that one, Mr. Chair.

THE CHAIR: Mr. Jones, we'll go to you.

GREG JONES: Very good question. I will tell you, the volunteer firefighter insurance levy - and the past presidents here with me can echo it as well - has made a big difference for the fire service. It gives us the ability to train our individuals to be prepared for motor vehicle accidents. That funding has had a great impact on all of us, really, across the service. I started as a volunteer firefighter, and toward the end of my volunteer career before I became a career member, I had the ability to use that volunteer insurance fund to get training.

We're at the point now where we're doing Level I training with it, the components, we're doing hazardous materials components which, in the past, we wouldn't have been able to fund for rural departments that wouldn't have to be involved in haz-mat. Now we have the ability to give them the information and have them train for that.

Lately we have started some work around heavy rescue training as well. That's something that we never really had in the province before. We've never spent a lot of time on it. That fund has given us the ability to do that. The insurance fund - I could talk about it for hours because the benefits of it to members across our province have been really important and really appreciated.

ROD NIELSEN: I just want to add that the relationship between us - that program used to be managed by the Office of the Fire Marshal, and it has since changed back to the Department of Finance and Treasury Board. We miss the relationship with the Office of the Fire Marshal because of their knowledge of the fire service and being able to make good judgment on what funds get to what department. We miss that relationship.

THE CHAIR: MLA Harrison, MLA Sheehy-Richard, and then MLA Burrill.

LARRY HARRISON: If I did not say it before, most of my experience has been with volunteer communities. I have an extremely high respect and appreciation for what they do. There is no question.

I'm going back to my further question. If you could name three actions that you would love to see take place to further, what would they be?

THE CHAIR: Mr. Jones, that's quite a task.

GREG JONES: That is quite a task and a very good question. My three very top ones would be, one is to focus on firefighter mental health and cancer. That's my number one. My number two is to focus on finding a solution that meets the needs of everybody for operational dispatch in our province, and my third one is around collaboration and governance of the fire service. It doesn't matter if it's volunteer or career or composite. All three of those affect each one of those branches. It's imperative that we focus on those three.

MELISSA SHEEHY-RICHARD: I just wanted to touch on something that not all fire departments have the pleasure of having, but I do know that one of the local ones around my area, the Brooklyn Volunteer Fire Department, has what they call a cadet or junior program. When we talk about support for firefighters and the number of hours for training, my husband too is dismayed. We had three boys and none of them, unfortunately, followed in his footsteps, but my niece is part of that cadet program. Can you just talk about how a young cadet program might benefit the recruitment aspect of the volunteer fire service in particular?

GREG JONES: Volunteer firefighter programs and cadet programs, they're very beneficial to recruitment of new members. I'm an example of that. As a kid, I wanted to be a firefighter. That's what I wanted to do. I decided later on in life I wanted to go to military. I came back to firefighting in the end.

When I was a kid, I didn't have the opportunity to have a junior program or a cadet program. We're starting to see an increase in cadet programs across Atlantic Canada. There are a lot of departments that are starting to do it now. My department has been doing it for the last 10 years, but various departments in our association have taken that on.

The cadet program is a little different in firefighting. The cadets do not get to go on the operational side. They don't get to go out on the field and go to calls. In many cases, they don't get to wear the bunker gear that we would normally wear. They have bunker gear that's cleaned and made just strictly for use not on emergency grounds. The cadets get the opportunity to do everything we do outside of that. They get the ability to find out what it's like to be a firefighter, the training that we do, the equipment that we use. They get to have the ability to see all that, and it gives them the opportunity to get the sense of: Do I want to go in the fire service, or do I want to try the cadet program and come back to the fire service in five or 10 years?

I have individuals, for me and my organization, who left our community, went away to university, and have come back to our community to work now. They've become volunteer firefighters and continue to this day. The cadet programs do have a very vast ability to assist. The important part is how we use that ability to make it work and make it work properly for us in a safe manner. I'll also let Mr. Nielsen speak on that subject.

ROD NIELSEN: Great question. Again, we have varying types of cadet programs across the province, pretty near every department to department. Definitely encourage it. It's one of those hard parts today with our new generations to be able to work with them and bring them into a professional kind of side. Most of the youth today have very different - from our experience, in the cadet programs as well.

The other thing is that in the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, there is something in the curriculum that is available. It was brought - and I can't remember the year, but I was president at the time, I believe in the South Shore-Shelburne area - where they actually introduced the - into the curriculum of the high school program. I would like to ask, even as an association, to revisit that and see how we can make that more successful. We know it's always a challenge to get into the curriculum in the high schools, even for first aid, so we would love to do that further.

I know some places in Newfoundland and Labrador are very successful at putting it in the curriculum. It's sort of like the old 4-H programs. It learns how to run a business meeting. They learn how to do all kinds of things that would help them in anything they do, not just firefighting.

GARY BURRILL: Deputy Minister Czapalay, I'd like to ask about the scope in time of the presumptive coverage. My understanding is that the expanded benefits cover diagnoses, which come since July 2021. I'm wondering, was consideration given to diagnoses before that time, and is that consideration being given now to expanding that - reaching back further?

AVA CZAPALAY: I don't think any consideration's been given to that.

GARY BURRILL: This is not a follow-up to my previous question. I would like to go back to the question of the changes of flammability that you raised earlier. This is something that comes up a lot - the building structures, the building code, the kind of household articles that Mr. Jones was mentioning. Does this mean that we need to look at the kind of increased funding that would make quicker response times possible? Is that what the increasing flammability is really saying to us? Could I ask that to Mr. Sears, Mr. Jones and Mr. Nielsen?

MICHAEL SEARS: I would say from my experience as a professional firefighter and seeing - the district I work in is in Clayton Park, and it's exploding up there. There's a city in between Bedford and Clayton Park now that would be a great spot to put a fire station. When we look at the building construction itself, how fast structures burn because of the materials that are in them - in my house, I've got true dimensional lumber. My stair treads are 2x6, 2x8, and when I look at some of the things on our new walk-throughs of buildings, to see OSB stair treads and OSB stair stringers, it's going to burn a lot quicker. There's no way around that.

To say that getting more members on scene quicker to fight a fire that's burning hotter and faster while burning dirtier and giving off more carcinogens to the members who are being exposed - of course. It shouldn't be an argument at all, and yet it is. When we talk about the growth of the services to support the needs, that's a discussion that really needs to be had. I think it likely affects on the volunteer side as well.

GREG JONES: I will say, the funding would help around the response for the changes in product - how products are made, how buildings are made, and how they burn. The problem would be, and the situation that we have, is that in rural Nova Scotia, it's the ability of how it affects fire departments. In rural Nova Scotia, unlike in the bigger municipalities, where we have career staff - rural Nova Scotia doesn't have that. Folks need to leave their place of employment, go to the fire hall in some cases, hop on the fire truck, and get to the scene. There needs to be other supports around how to get equipment there quicker, but potentially it's not around the funding aspect of it.

[11:30 a.m.]

Sprinklers, for sure, in buildings is something that we've talked about in the past. Adding that to the building code, requiring residential homes to have a sprinkler system in them, that will also reduce the ability for us to deal with carcinogens up front to reduce the buildup of the fire. It also helps us in our job at the end of the day.

THE CHAIR: MLA Burrill for a follow-up.

GARY BURRILL: My question is not a follow-up but a new question, so I'd be happy to go in the queue if there are others.

THE CHAIR: Okay, I'll put you in the queue. Thank you.

ALI DUALE: Mr. Nielsen, I just want to follow up on your response to an earlier question. I'm really interested in the school curriculum program. Just out of the things that I'm in favour of - this kind of idea is based on preventable and also to build the next generation to be mindful, especially when it comes to fire services.

Would you mind elaborating? What was the program? What did it entail, and where did the cracks fall, in order to avoid this happening in the future? Oftentimes we see good ideas come up, but they disappear, and nobody is accountable.

ROD NIELSEN: We were at fault, as FSANS, actually, on not following up on that. One thing that we see that happens - and we don't care for it to happen - is a lot of these initiatives come from one MLA or one area of the province and it doesn't really get related to the whole province. As FSANS, we're trying to capture that so that it doesn't get lost.

To answer your question directly, where is it? I will get you some more details. We are at fault in not keeping up with it. I know somewhere in Cape Breton Island, somebody else has done it as well, through the same program.

I'm totally with you. I think it's important for the generations. I see some of our Grade 12s - the high school group - have their leadership programs. I think you could blend very easily in with that as well.

We will get back to you with the details of where it lies within the curriculum and the success of the departments that are using it. We'll get back to you.

ALI DUALE: There's one thing that I'm really interested in. I'm going to say this openly today: It is something that I have a passion for. It's actually one of the things that I entered politics for. Mike Sears knows it is something that will stay the rest of my life. I'm sure some of you can recall the Barho family fire. We lost seven children in this city, in this province, and we have done nothing - zero action. With nobody's fault, other than that this is the nature of how we do business. Things happen and nobody takes accountability.

I am committed to the fire service and the protection and the fire prevention in this province. I am not the expert, but you are. I'm seeking your support and your expertise and your wisdom in terms of the fire service.

I look forward to being in touch with the association and to engage and to come up with a better future for our province and our children. I'm not actually sure who has the record of the fire fatalities in this province. Oftentimes we see that most of them are children, who are innocent, who have no idea who takes this responsibility.

I really believe I'm with you in this. I look forward to working with the association, and I hope my colleagues will pay attention this week. Fire has no boundaries. It doesn't matter who you are or where you live.

I thank you for your service and your vision.

GARY BURRILL: My question is for Mr. Jones and Mr. Nielsen. When we speak to people from volunteer departments, including volunteer departments that have career people in them, we ask: What's the greatest challenge? What's the greatest problem? What's the thing that's holding you back the most? Often the subject is around recruiting and developing new people. I feel like we ought not to leave our discussion today without providing you an opportunity to say something about what you think the Province could do to address this great concern across the province.

GREG JONES: I will say that recruitment and retention from members and the development of members when they start in the fire service, whether career or volunteer - it's very crucial that we have the tools available to actually bring them in and continue

them down the road of success. In some departments, we've seen individuals start in the program and then decide, you know what, it's too much for me, I'm giving too much of myself to the rest of the public, which has some effect to that.

The tools that are required to make that happen are the supports that we have, the mandate for the fire service and what it actually means to be a volunteer, and the functionality and the morale boost that we have. As simple as it may sound for the fire service to have Volunteer Firefighter Tax Credit availability - the Emergency Services Provider Fund is important for requests for funding and the cost for funding for equipment, licence plates and all that. It may seem like a minor support. It's a big support to the membership, and it's a big draw to pull folks into the fire service and maintain them.

The unfortunate part is if some of those supports went away, members of the fire service unfortunately would leave. It's very important, and one of the keys for our association is to continue that, to keep the gold standard up, as was said earlier on, for the fire service, and make sure that everybody has the ability and the coverage for what we need, and the morale boost to us moving forward.

ROD NIELSEN: Your question was on what tools and whatever we could do. We're sort of unique here in Nova Scotia. As I travelled as the president of this association across Canada for multiple years, I became very aware sitting in a meeting one day when they went around a room such as this, and they looked at me and said, thank you for being here. I said, I'm very glad to be here. They talked about different things. I was there on my own dime. I was on vacation to be able to go. Those things are a challenge for the fire departments and the fire service as FSANS to be able to function and be able to be one of those tools to help the other departments.

We're struggling. As a group, here we are invited down here today. How do we pay for us to even get here? (Interruption) One of the challenges - to even support FSANS financially, we're struggling, and to convince others - for us to be doing business on your behalf, it costs money. We need that.

The other thing that I realized too, travelling across Canada: We call ourselves volunteer firefighters here in Nova Scotia. We are the only province in Canada that is truly volunteer. We don't get paid. You take parts of New Brunswick, parts of Quebec, everywhere. They're paid on call. In Ontario, they say they have volunteer firefighters. They're paid on call. They're making sometimes more money than our rural firefighters in their regular day jobs. If we look at what we can do to help, it is to be able to support FSANS and be able to give us the tools in some financial manner.

The other one I always look at is leadership. Today, with our multiple generations, I look at my generation, I've got 14-year-olds in our cadet program and I have 80-year-olds who are support people. We learn differently, we talk differently, and we need to be able to educate those all the way through. Some of the tools would be: How do we deal

with people? When it comes down to it, when we have problems in a fire department that's falling apart, it's usually personal issues. It's not always financial - it's usually personal issues.

We don't have our group across - do we have consistent by-laws? Do we have consistent GOGs or guidelines? We don't. We don't have standards. We have zero standards. FSANS creates a few guidelines for different departments to do. We have uptake. There's no mandate. We can't introduce a standard with the governance that we currently have.

THE CHAIR: I would remind you - you might be aware - that you can reach out to the clerk. Some of your expenses are covered for you today, like transportation and meals. We can't pay your wages for lost work today, but reach out to the clerk. There are some things that can be covered for your appearance today.

ROD NIELSEN: COVID-19 has helped that situation. We as a group - between EHS, the Fire Marshal's Office - we would not meet, and believe that financial was part of the problem - to bring us up and pay us a meal and pay our gas expenses. We have met more now since COVID-19 - through Zoom or whatever. I don't think that's going to change. I hope it's not going to change. Some of our meetings where we used to meet maybe twice a year, or maybe even once a year, we're meeting at least quarterly. I think that's a big help. And if that's the financial part of it, we'll live with that. That's great.

THE CHAIR: Thank you for adding that.

MELISSA SHEEHY-RICHARD: I just wanted to know if we could expand - we have a little bit of time left - a little more on the challenges for recruitment versus the volunteer and the paid firefighter, if we could go into a little bit more detail on how those challenges are . . .

THE CHAIR: Mr. Sears, to begin.

MICHAEL SEARS: Here in Halifax specifically, the department announces that we're recruiting. It's posted in a lot of different forums. In between recruiting, they do a lot of outreach. There are members specific to our department who go on outreach and engage different communities and different groups to try to get a wide variety of people to apply for a career in firefighting.

Once the recruitment starts, it typically takes about six months to go through, and then successful applicants are placed in a career recruit training program, which I think right now is about 16 to 18 weeks, four days a week. Then they move from there into responding to emergencies and being at the stations.

So on our side, it's pretty straightforward. The process hasn't really changed much in many years. We just started a new class, I think, earlier this week. I think it's 25 members in training right now. (Interruption) Yesterday.

That's kind of how it works for the career side. I think for the other three professional services in Nova Scotia, it's fairly similar. I think slight differences.

THE CHAIR: Mr. Roper, I see you getting into position. You'd like to answer this as well?

JIM ROPER: A very interesting question, and a subject that's been challenging for the last number of years, especially on the volunteer side. Many factors affect it. The migration out west of young people has been a big issue. We bring a young person into the fire service, spend upwards of \$10,000 by the time we outfit them with turnout gear, provide training for them and complete that training, and then they move on to a job out west and either become transient and travel back and forth and have one week off to do everything - the honey do list, for lack of a better term - and don't have time for the fire service.

That's a big challenge. The idea of keeping the younger generation here at home is one answer to that, hopefully through new employment. That can happen.

I had a senior firefighter who's long passed now, but he always told me: Once you get them in the door, you get that hook in them, you can keep them. I think you see evidence of that here. We've been here a long time.

It's a matter of having programs, and like you talked about, small things like licence plates and tax credits for young families. That's a savings. That's a couple hundred dollars a year, but that's something that I don't have to spend. Those things are very beneficial recruitment and retention tools. The WCB, the cancer coverage, things like that - those are all policies and programs that we push big time. We just did a door-to-door campaign. We have a brochure. Those are all mentioned, that those programs are available, that you're covered under WCB when you're on a fire scene as part of the fire service.

Those kinds of programs are exceptional recruitment and retention policies. I think we only have to build on those and think about those, how we can provide that, how we can develop training programs that fit into schedules for younger people, people with family lives. It's difficult to give up a whole weekend when you've got two young children at home, things like that. How do we diversify that?

The fire school in the province here has gone to a lot of online courses. Those are beneficial. People can do that after the kids go to bed. You can spend a couple of hours doing training programs. There are some initiatives out there that have been worked on. There are probably many more. I think a round table discussion with members of the fire

service would put a lot more together there. I think that's what we need. Again, part of that collaboration and cooperation program.

[11:45 a.m.]

I think there are ways we can do it. I think it's challenging and it will be challenging. Some of the demographics, we look at rural areas growing in population, but it tends to be an older generation. There are positions for older people in the fire service. We need truck drivers, we need people to do traffic control and communications, so they're available. To do front-line attack and interior attack, you need young, healthy people who can do that. To get them close to the community that can respond in a hurry, having employers who are willing to let people go is another one. There's a key program through the Canadian Association of Fire Chiefs where we recognize those employers who let you drop what you're doing and run out the door.

There are all kinds of initiatives there. I guess it's a matter of getting the bodies in place to use them and work on them.

THE CHAIR: MLA MacDonald, and then MLA Ince, and there's just roughly about four minutes left.

JOHN A. MACDONALD: He must think I'm going to ask a long-winded question. You touched on rural and urban, and of course, where I live, it's the (Inaudible) change whereabouts, and Mr. Nielsen knows, because he's been down there. They're talking 7,000, 8,000 people are going to be there in the next seven, eight years, which would be huge. What are the different demands of trying to get rural versus urban volunteers and paid to it? There is a difference. It's totally different in rural, because to your point, if they can't make the truck, sometimes they just decide, if I can't make the truck, why am I coming? I'll let whoever wants to hit that one.

ROD NIELSEN: That's very interesting. Communities change from community to community. You can't just paint them with one brush, of course, but your growing community can be very diverse. You don't know who's coming in, you don't know if they're our good old Atlantic Canadian citizens who want to help out in the community. Our rural ones probably emphasize on community. You emphasize on the things that you can do for community. When it comes to rural, it's a little more difficult to do that, but it's still a component. If you want to be part of the community, the fire department is one place to be. Lions Club and a few others, but the fire department blends you in.

We had somebody just join our department in the last two years, immigrated here from England and didn't know anybody, had no connection. His wife was here for an educational session. Anyway, that's how he got into the community, and it's paid off in dividends. As I said, you can't paint it with one brush, but your growing communities are

going to be a challenge for us to be able to have people in, and how you publicize it is going to be crucial.

TONY INCE: We've spent a lot of time today talking about the challenges and everything else, so I want to ask: What excites you about firefighting, and what changes are happening that excite you? Any one of you.

THE CHAIR: I like ending on a happy note. We'll give this to Mr. Jones.

GREG JONES: Very good question. I'll tell you what excites me: It's the ability for me to come to work every day on behalf of the fire service as the president of this association to deal with situations and make change and be collaborative on it.

There's a lot of stuff that goes on in the fire service of our province every given day, good and bad, and the ability for us to have the opportunity to collaboratively work on issues and change them, not just for now but for the future. When I started, there were individuals who didn't have that ability. Today we're moving in the right direction.

The other thing that excites me is the ability that for me, my family supports me in what I do. All the other fire service members and my colleagues can support this across the province. They're in the same position. My wife lets me go to fire scenes (Laughter). My wife lets me go to work, and so do my kids, at the end of the day. Without their support, and without the support of everybody else we have in Nova Scotia, the fire service couldn't do what we actually do each and every day.

To answer your question, that's what excites me. And that's what excites most of our members: the ability to have support and to go out and do exactly what we want to do.

I didn't pick the fire service because it was the best thing or the shiny red truck or whatever. I picked it because it was something I wanted to do to support my community and support each other. That's why I support and enjoy the fire service.

THE CHAIR: That concludes our question period. We don't have any committee business, so we will allow for any final brief comments that you may want to make, anybody. Did you have any final comments that you'd like to make as a closing statement?

If not, this has been a fantastic meeting today. I can speak for all of our committee and reiterate what's been said. Thank you. I took a lot of notes today as well. A lot to learn and a lot to take forward. Thank you again to those of you who risk your lives and your health and safety for all of our communities and our families.

I'm fortunate to represent very good fire departments through Kingston and Aylesford, Berwick, Waterville. Just on behalf of all our constituencies, thank you for what you do. We'll look forward to having further conversations.

That concludes our business with you today. I guess with no other committee business, I'll call for an adjournment for the meeting. (Interruption) Oh, yes, thank you.

Our next meeting is technically scheduled for March 28th, but we know that - oh yes, we will have that meeting for agencies, boards, and commissions. That will be on March 28th from 10:00 to 11:00 a.m.

The meeting is adjourned. Thank you, everybody.

[The committee adjourned at 11:52 a.m.]