

HANSARD

NOVA SCOTIA HOUSE OF ASSEMBLY

STANDING COMMITTEE

ON

HUMAN RESOURCES

Tuesday, October 3, 2023

Committee Room

**Implementing the Equity and Anti-Racism Strategy
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

[Nolan Young was replaced by Hon. Steve Craig.]
[Ali Duale was replaced by Hon. Patricia Arab.]

In Attendance:

Gordon Hebb
Chief Legislative Counsel

Judy Kavanagh
Legislative Committee Clerk

WITNESSES

Office of Equity and Anti-Racism Initiatives

Candace Thomas, Deputy Minister, Department of Justice
Christine Gibbons, Executive Director, Strategic Policy & Innovation
Dawn Stegen, Executive Director, Accessibility Directorate

Department of Health and Wellness

John Ariyo, Executive Director, Equity and Engagement



HALIFAX, TUESDAY, OCTOBER 3, 2023

STANDING COMMITTEE ON HUMAN RESOURCES

1:00 P.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 the Chair of this committee. Today, in addition to reviewing appointments to agencies, boards, and commissions, we'll hear from the Office of Equity and Anti-Racism Initiatives regarding implementing the equity and anti-racism strategy.

At this point, I'd like everybody in the room to please turn your phones off or put them on vibrate or silent, please. In case of an emergency, we'll all use the Granville Street exit.

At this point, I'd like to ask all of our committee members to introduce themselves for the record, and we'll begin on my left with our vice chair.

[The committee members introduced themselves.]

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

Before we go into our topic this afternoon, we will, as per normal, attend to a bit of committee business, namely the agencies, boards, and commissions appointments.

MLA MacDonald.

JOHN A. MACDONALD: For the Department of Economic Development, I recommend Luc Erjavec be appointed as member of the Halifax Convention Centre Board of Directors, Events East.

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.

MLA MacDonald.

JOHN A. MACDONALD: For the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, I recommend that Kelly Oliver be appointed as Mi'kmaq member, Chignecto-Central SR, and Audriana Paul be appointed as member, First Nations of the Council on Mi'kmaq Education.

THE CHAIR: Motion on the table. Any discussion?

All those in favour? Contrary minded? Thank you.

The motion is carried.

MLA MacDonald.

JOHN A. MACDONALD: For the Department of Finance and Treasury Board, Minister responsible for the Liquor Control Act, I recommend Kirk MacRae be appointed as Director and Vice-Chair of the Board of Directors of the Nova Scotia Liquor Corporation.

THE CHAIR: Motion on the table. Any discussion? MLA Hansen.

SUZY HANSEN: I just also want to make it known that as much as we want to appoint members to these boards, we also want to make sure that we're very transparent, and that we show that we are open to diversity. I want to say that this is once again another partisan moving into the Nova Scotia Liquor Corporation. I just wanted to make that known here today, so that we can all be aware of why it's so important to have a diverse board.

THE CHAIR: Duly noted.

All those in favour? Contrary minded? Thank you.

The motion is carried.

MLA MacDonald.

JOHN A. MACDONALD: For the Department of Health and Wellness, I recommend that Dan Boyd be appointed as Public Representative of the Nova Scotia Board of Examiners in Psychology.

THE CHAIR: Motion on the table. Any discussion?

All those in favour? Contrary minded? Thank you.

The motion is carried.

MLA MacDonald.

JOHN A. MACDONALD: For the Department of Justice, I recommend that Aimee Walters be appointed as member of the Board of Directors of the Licensed Professional Planners Association.

THE CHAIR: Motion on the table. Any discussion?

All those in favour? Contrary minded? Thank you.

The motion is carried.

MLA MacDonald.

JOHN A. MACDONALD: Last, but definitely not least, for the Department of Labour, Skills and Immigration, I recommend that Alfred Burgesson, Danny Cavanagh, Julie Marks, and Bob Smith be appointed as members/employer representatives of the Minimum Wage Review Committee.

THE CHAIR: MLA MacDonald, can we ask you to just name those people once again, please?

JOHN A. MACDONALD: I'm sorry, I did make an error on that. Es and Rs blended on me. I'll move to recommend Alfred Burgesson and Danny Cavanagh as members/employee representatives, and Julie Marks and Bob Smith as members/employer representatives of the Minimum Wage Review Committee.

THE CHAIR: Motion on the table. Any discussion?

All those in favour? Contrary minded? Thank you.

The motion is carried.

We will attend to some committee business at the end of our topic discussion this afternoon, and we will move into it. Welcome, everybody. Thank you for being here this afternoon. We'd like to welcome you all here. Our topic today will be Implementing the Equity and Anti-Racism Strategy.

At this point, I would like to ask our table of guests to introduce themselves, and then we'll get into our prepared remarks, if you have any, after that. We'll begin on my left. Ms. Stegen.

Excuse me, sorry - I just wanted to remind you that you don't have to hit your button on the microphone. When I recognize you, that's when your red light will come on, and then that's when you'd begin speaking. Just a bit of housekeeping.

[The witnesses introduced themselves.]

THE CHAIR: Thank you. At this point, we'd like to offer to any of our guests this afternoon an opportunity for some opening statements. We'll begin with Deputy Minister Thomas.

CANDACE THOMAS: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. I am going to speak on behalf of the department and the others who are attending with me today.

Good afternoon again, Mr. Chair, and to all of the members of the committee, and everyone else who is present here today. I am pleased to be here to discuss the implementation of the Province of Nova Scotia's Equity and Anti-Racism Strategy to address systemic hate, inequity, and racism in the public sector, which is part of the mandate of the Honourable Brad Johns, who is the minister responsible for the Office of Equity and Anti-Racism Initiatives.

I will use OEA, as well as the full name of the Office of Equity and Anti-Racism Initiatives, as I go through my remarks and as we address any questions here this afternoon as well. I will also mention that we do have one individual who was not able to attend with us today, because she is under the weather - Kim Barro from the Department of Health and Wellness.

The Office of Equity and Anti-Racism Initiatives was established in March 2021 to work across government, and with partners and communities, to improve the lives of underrepresented and underserved communities by identifying and addressing systemic inequity and racism.

In May 2023, the Office of Equity and Anti-Racism Initiatives was formally made a division of the Department of Justice, which is responsible for the administration of justice in the province. The work of the Office of Equity and Anti-Racism Initiatives is closely aligned with this overarching mandate of Justice. For example, the Minister of Justice is responsible for the Human Rights Act and the Accessibility Act.

Significant work is under way within the department to combat systemic discrimination and racism, such as the development of accessibility standards, an African Nova Scotian justice action plan, and an Indigenous justice action strategy, as well as implementing recommendations from the Wortley report on street checks. All of this work is being done with communities, and the principle of “nothing about us without us” grounds all of this work.

The new structure of the Office of Equity and Anti-Racism Initiatives is now similar and in line with that of the Department of African Nova Scotian Affairs, the Department of Acadian Affairs and Francophonie, and the Nova Scotia Advisory Council on the Status of Women. OEA’s function has not changed. The team at OEA continues their exemplary work.

The Equity and Anti-Racism Strategy was made possible as a result of engagement of Nova Scotians and the all-party legislative committee - which included some of you - who worked together on the Dismantling Racism and Hate Act, which passed unanimously. It outlines Nova Scotia’s approach to addressing systemic racism, hate, and inequity, including the stipulation that government develop a strategy for action. This legislation also empowers government to require other public sector bodies, such as municipalities, villages, colleges, universities, and Crown corporations, to develop their own strategies.

In July, the Government of Nova Scotia, through OEA, released the Equity and Anti-Racism Strategy - the first of its kind in Canada. The goal of the strategy is to ensure a whole-of-government approach in identifying and addressing systemic hate, inequity, and racism. As part of its work helping to inform the all-party committee and in developing the strategy, OEA engaged with over 1,200 Nova Scotians and 70 community organizations. Additional community-specific engagements were undertaken for input on the definitions of the types of hate, inequity, and racism included in the strategy.

The strategy responds to community feedback by addressing how government applies an equity and anti-racism lens when considering and making legislation, regulations, and policies. It also responds to community concerns about how equity and race-based data is collected and used, how we will support and fund communities in addressing hate, inequity, and racism through a community network, and the need to support municipalities and villages to create welcoming communities by doing equity and anti-racism work throughout the province.

The strategy includes specific initiatives to address systemic hate, inequity, and racism for underrepresented and underserved communities. Specifically named are Mi'kmaq and persons of Indigenous descent, African Nova Scotians and persons of African descent, persons with disabilities, 2SLGBTQIA+ and gender-diverse communities, faith-based communities, and newcomers.

It is important to recognize that for the first time, there is a lead department within government for the 2SLGBTQIA+ community. The Department of Justice, specifically OEA, is proud to fulfill this role - pun intended. Working with community, over the next year we will develop the first Nova Scotia action plan dedicated to the 2SLGBTQIA+ community to address hate and discrimination based on gender identity, gender expression, and sexual orientation.

Two other consistent themes emerged from OEA's public engagement: inequity in the health care system and in the workplace. In response to what we heard, the strategy also includes a separate health equity framework, and a separate plan is under development to address psychological safety in the workplace. These aspects of the strategy are led by the Department of Health and Wellness and the Department of Labour, Skills and Immigration, respectively. The strategy provides a path forward for government, its partners, and communities to make progress in addressing these systemic issues. It goes to the foundation of how laws and regulations are made, and how policies and programs are developed.

This work will take time, and the strategy itself will evolve over time as we continue to advance equity for all Nova Scotians - and as society itself matures with respect to these issues and as different issues emerge. Collectively, government and community blazed a new trail when it comes to this strategy. There was no precedent to follow. That said, there are several ways that OEA and government more broadly will track progress. A report must be filed annually with the Speaker of the House of Assembly, the strategy must be reviewed every five years, and that must include engagement with community. OEA will be connecting communities with each other and with government for meaningful, sustained dialogue through the community network that was launched in July.

Two further quick notes as I wrap up my remarks: First, OEA has not replaced the functions of other equity-focused offices or divisions such as the African Nova Scotian Affairs, the Office of L'nu Affairs, the Advisory Council on the Status of Women, or the Accessibility Directorate.

Secondly and lastly, I must take a moment to speak about the team at the Office of Equity and Anti-Racism. OEA has been purposeful in attracting talented people from underrepresented and underserved communities to carry out its important work. Having members on the team with deep community understanding and lived experience is essential. Everyone on the team at OEA plays a key role in furthering OEA's and Minister

Johns' mandate. I want to acknowledge their commitment and consistent high-quality work.

[1:15 p.m.]

Thank you. With that, we will be happy to take any questions.

THE CHAIR: Thank you, deputy minister. I'm assuming there are no other opening comments.

Again, we look forward to the conversation around the table this afternoon. It is the practice of this committee to ask questions by show of hands, so I'll be recognizing members around the table when they raise their hand for questioning. I will allow for one question at a time. You can have a two-part question if you'd like, but as far as follow-ups, we'll just allow for one question as we go forward first. We'll carry on our conversation until around 2:45 p.m. Then we'll have to finish for some committee business afterwards, and give you an opportunity to have a closing statement.

With that being said, we'll begin our questioning. I see MLA Hansen's hand up first. MLA Hansen.

SUZY HANSEN: Thank you, Mr. Chair. Thank you so much for your introduction, and as well, seeing each and every one of you at the table, so we can ask some really important questions.

First, my thought is - and this is just me thinking about when the office was shifted in alignment with the Department of Justice - my question was, what was the driving force to move the office? I know you mentioned that it aligns with HRC and with accessibility, but as we know - just thinking about the legislation and some of the things we've talked about around the table when we're sitting - there's a lot of work to do when it comes to systemic racism, and when it comes down to a number of other pieces that this particular body, the OEA, would be doing the work with.

I just want a little bit more clarification on why it was shifted. I understand the sustainability piece, the continued work, but I just didn't really quite understand why it was shifted under the Department of Justice.

THE CHAIR: Deputy Minister Thomas.

CANDACE THOMAS: Thank you for the question. Unfortunately, I don't have an answer, though, for the question. Those decisions are made outside of the department. We would not be privy to the Cabinet confidential conversations that would happen to make those types of decisions on the structure of government.

THE CHAIR: What I'd like to make sure we understand is that we're not allowing for two questions in a row, if possible. So we'll have you in the next round.

MLA Coombes, did you have a question?

KENDRA COOMBES: I guess I might as well go with this one. The strategy says that the Department of "Community Services is implementing a new Child and Family Well-being Practice Framework which has inclusion, diversity, and equity as its guiding principles and is a transition to a decolonized framework with a prevention focus." That's on Page 9.

The strategy does not provide a timeline, though, for this work. When will the framework be available?

THE CHAIR: Deputy Minister Thomas.

CANDACE THOMAS: I should also just make a general statement that the information that is in the strategy from all of the departments in government, we do not have - we're not managing that out of OEA, so I don't have specific answers to some of the information that is referred to in the strategy.

When we undertook this work, it was very clear that there were a number of things already under way across government to address the issues of inequity in our society. Therefore, we ensured that there was space in the strategy to illustrate the types of initiatives and work that were happening already.

Unfortunately, I don't have the answer to that question.

THE CHAIR: MLA Sheehy-Richard.

MELISSA SHEEHY-RICHARD: Tell us more about the health equity framework - in particular if there are themes that you're seeing, and what implementation of those themes might look like. I believe that might be directed more towards you, actually?

THE CHAIR: Mr. Ariyo.

JOHN ARIYO: Through the Chair, when the work was completed, we heard from a lot of Nova Scotians as part of the engagement process. Three themes came out of it. One has to do with the patients' experiences - how we improve that when Nova Scotians go to hospitals and some of the point-of-care access, that the system there is equitable. It's also accounting for different experiences of Nova Scotians from across the board.

The first theme is around patients' experiences. The second one talks about health human resources: How do we better make sure that workplaces are diverse at leadership-

level, and practitioners-level? So the second one is health human resources. Then the third one is around equity policies and programs that are run. We have to check all those policies to make sure that they are also culturally sensitive, and they're also accounting for different things that are happening around the experiences of racialized Nova Scotians.

Out of those three themes, 35 actions came out of them. We're working right now as assistant partners to be moving forward with the collective implementation.

THE CHAIR: What I'd like to see us as a committee do - again, I'm trying to stay away from follow-up questions if possible - anyone who would like to have a two-part question in their question, I'd recommend we do that.

MELISSA SHEEHY-RICHARD: Two-part question in my question.

THE CHAIR: Next time, if that's all right. I do want to stay consistent with that if we can. MLA Ince is next, then MLA Craig.

HON. TONY INCE: Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you all for coming here today. This strategy comes from a bill that was originally tabled by our caucus in 2021 and continued with the collaboration of the all-party committee. However, many asks of that committee have not been included in this strategy, and one key take-away from this strategy is how vague the commitments are, and very little action and accountability. Can you explain why there have been no real impactful commitments to this strategy?

THE CHAIR: That's to Deputy Minister Thomas?

TONY INCE: Yes.

THE CHAIR: Deputy Minister Thomas.

CANDACE THOMAS: The strategy itself is, of course, a living document, and as we launched in July, we are continuing work in earnest across government. A number of the elements and aspects of the strategy, of course, are at the very early stages of the work that has to be done. There will be accountability and deliverables on the work as we progress. There will be an annual report, for example, that is required by the strategy that will demonstrate to government that the work is ongoing and under way. The first report was delivered in July of this year.

I could ask Christine to speak to the contents, perhaps, of what was reported - but really appreciating that is really, really early days for the strategy. It is not intended to be: This is it and nothing else will happen with this work. It does have to be iterative. It is going to evolve and respond to what we're hearing as this work develops and progresses. It is a long game, and I think we all know that. We can appreciate that this is not something that can be fixed overnight.

Anything to add on the report, if I may?

THE CHAIR: Ms. Gibbons.

CHRISTINE GIBBONS: Yes, our first annual report as per the legislation was tabled with the House by July 31st of this year. What we thought was important with this first report was to provide an update for Nova Scotians on the work flowing out of the Act. You'll see reference to a number of the larger initiatives that are embedded in the Act within that annual report. As the strategy progresses, you'll see updates within those annual reports on specific initiatives that are mentioned in the strategy, but this first report really focused on implementation of the Act.

THE CHAIR: Thank you, Ms. Gibbons. MLA Craig.

HON. STEVE CRAIG: Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you for being here. It's a wonderful topic that we need to explore deeper. Former Minister Ince, thank you for setting up the office that is represented here today in 2017 - yet now we have a strategy. Setting up an office is one thing; having a strategy to direct us and where we need to go is quite something else. I'm glad to see that evolution come a part here and represented.

Part of the strategy our government is investing in is helping municipalities and villages to develop equity and anti-racism plans. I note when I was on HRM city council, we had set up in my tenure the Office of Diversity and Inclusion, and also the African Nova Scotia Affairs Integration Office. I have some knowledge of what can be done, what's possible, and the difficulties around doing this and the challenges that we have. I wonder if you're able to share a few more details about this announcement of municipalities and villages to develop their own equity and anti-racism plans, and how engagement has been going on with the municipalities on this.

THE CHAIR: Deputy Minister Thomas.

CANDACE THOMAS: Definitely, there are key intersections between the work that's happening in this strategy and OEA and government, and of course municipalities. With respect to some of the particulars and where we are with that work and how we're engaging with municipalities, I am going to turn it over to Christine to expand on that for the committee.

THE CHAIR: Ms. Gibbons.

CHRISTINE GIBBONS: As you mentioned, it is early days, but over the past year we have been meeting with municipalities and villages to prep them to be able to implement that requirement in the Act - for them to have equity and anti-racism plans. We've had a couple of meetings already to get a better sense of what's already happening, because many

municipalities are ahead of us in this work. They have established strategies and units, and dedicated resources that are already doing this work.

What we want to do is make sure that we're building the requirements for the plans with them. One of the key pieces of feedback that we got from municipalities and villages was that they really need specific supports. They would like templates for the plans, they would like tool kits and training. One of the key pieces of building up the great work that the Accessibility Directorate has done with municipalities and villages was that they were very clear they needed financial support to help.

We were very thankful when we released the strategy to be able to announce that we were providing municipalities and villages with \$1.185 million. We're now working with municipalities and villages to determine how to appropriately distribute that money to have the greatest impact. We're just continuing to work very closely with them as we roll out these requirements.

THE CHAIR: Our next three questioners are MLA Ritcey, MLA Hansen, and MLA Arab.

MLA Ritcey.

DAVE RITCEY: This question is directed toward the deputy minister. We know trust and accountability are critical to addressing systematic hate, inequity, and racism, and to promote diversity, and achieve anti-racist and equitable outcomes that improve the economic and social well-being of all Nova Scotians.

I think you touched on it briefly, but I'd like for you to explain to the committee a bit more about the first annual report that was just published, and what we might expect the department to focus on in the next reporting period.

THE CHAIR: Deputy Minister Thomas.

CANDACE THOMAS: Expanding or taking what Christine has just mentioned around what's in the current report, we expect that throughout the next year - since this is an annual report - much more will be done. We have initiatives that are well under way. We certainly hope that we'll be able to report to the Assembly that some of these initiatives and work are done.

Where we are as far as progress with some of the initiatives that lie with OEA, that is what we will highlight in the next report. We will also make sure that we're looking to respond to what we're hearing from community during that time as well. I suspect that the community network will be well under way. That's something that is in the very early stages, and some of the other key aspects that are noted in the strategy. Of course, we will

have put more time and considerable progress hopefully will have been made with those as well.

[1:30 p.m.]

THE CHAIR: MLA Hansen.

SUZY HANSEN: The strategy says: “OEA is building a public-facing dashboard to report on government’s progress in relation to key measures and indicators.” When will the dashboard be ready, and what will be the key measures and indicators?

THE CHAIR: Deputy Minister Thomas.

CANDACE THOMAS: I am going to turn that over to Christine. I believe she has more information on that.

THE CHAIR: Ms. Gibbons.

CHRISTINE GIBBONS: This is an important part of our accountability package that we are diligently working on. We don’t have a specific timeline for this. However, what’s very important for us is that we validate with the community what they want to see, what they consider would be success in this area, and that we build the dashboard based on that community feedback. Our plan is to work on the dashboard over the next year, and we would be able to report on that in the annual report next year.

THE CHAIR: MLA Arab.

HON. PATRICIA ARAB: Just to build on this line of questioning - and I want to preface this by saying that I don’t sit here and think: Oh, this is an easy fix and you’re going to have a magic wand, adjust everything, this is what you’ve got to do. But one of the key things when it comes to any group who feels marginalized for whatever reason is there is a lack of trust - so either previous experiences within systems or a newcomer population that comes from countries or places where government isn’t to be trusted. When we talk about this lengthy timeline of a year-end report or nothing concrete - again, I’m not sitting here thinking you should have this answer and you should know and that it shouldn’t be a fluid document.

I agree that this strategy should be ever-changing, but there has to be something that indicates to the communities this impacts that this work is being done, and that’s not in a yearly report. That’s not in a year end. With the vagueness of timelines and the vagueness of commitments, what do you feel can be done in order to rebuild this trust that has been eroded over time?

THE CHAIR: Deputy Minister Thomas.

CANDACE THOMAS: I'll start by saying that we all acknowledge that trust is critical in any work that we do for the public and with the public. With respect to those who have been overlooked, underrepresented and underserved, trust is critical. The key thing is that we're not starting here. This isn't work that we're starting because we have a strategy. Departments and government have been working with communities for a very long time, which is illustrated by the various initiatives and work that's already illustrated in the strategy already under way - and many of which have seen some success. We can't do that without community.

We are working each and every day building relationships, strengthening relationships, repairing relationships with community in all of this work that we do - and hearing from community. If we don't hear what the needs are from community, we don't have the answers, and we cannot improve and we cannot fix the historical wrongs that have been very long-standing in our society.

We are doing the really, really hard work of being engaged with the public, and in particular the members of the organizations and groups that I've expressed at the outset in my remarks - those communities that need a voice and need to know that their voice is being heard. I can assure you that is happening. Sometimes it's slow-going. Sometimes we do take two steps forward and one step back because we actually make mistakes, but we are earnest and sincere in the work that has to happen for Nova Scotians.

We have to make this a great place for all Nova Scotians to live in. We're really being very intentional, and government recognizing that these are the challenges, and acknowledging and knowing that there are people who have been harmed is forefront in all of the work that we're doing. We're just being very honest and open and receptive of what we heard from individuals, and that is what is reflected in the strategy.

THE CHAIR: We'll go to MLA Sheehy-Richard, and then MLA MacDonald, and then MLA Ince.

MELISSA SHEEHY-RICHARD: I can hear and feel the passion and the struggle in your voice when you speak to that. I admire the work that you're doing. I know when I was first elected, one of the very first meetings I went to was SPEC - supporting and promoting equity in our communities. It was very eye-opening for me because I realized very quickly that I myself had unconscious bias that I didn't even know exists.

I've been working with that group and I'm happy to say that they've been working with the municipality at home and have set up a committee. They have yet to meet, I think. They're still working on some of the background and on the municipal and you get a little bit ahead, and then it's Summer and they're not meeting as often.

I think that trust is the hard thing to build in all, even in the emergency rooms. You speak of the hospital, and I know that there's some good work being done in our own emergency department to help educate and build trust.

My comment was that, but my question is - I didn't say my two parts, so back to the patient experience, health HR, and equity policies. Is there a place that Nova Scotians could go if they wanted to learn more about this health equity framework and some of the work being done, so perhaps I could use it in my role with constituents to just say: Did you know this is happening? Here's where you can go and find out more.

THE CHAIR: Mr. Ariyo.

JOHN ARIYO: Currently, the framework itself is part of the anti-racism strategy. They can go straight to the OEA website to check that one out. At the same time, we're working as a system right now to also start to talk about how to implement that framework itself. The work will be ongoing. We've taken a system approach, incorporating all the six health partners: Department of Health and Wellness, Office of Addictions and Mental Health, Office of Healthcare Professionals Recruitment, Department of Seniors and Long-term Care, Nova Scotia Health Authority, as well as IWK Health Centre. We are moving forward with the implementation to reveal all those 35 actions. We're also hoping to be creating some metrics in terms of what is coming out, what has been implemented.

We have not determined the details of what that will be, but I just want to say that a systemic approach will be taken to that, but for now, to just check out the framework itself that will be on the Office of Equity and Anti-Racism Initiatives website.

THE CHAIR: MLA MacDonald.

JOHN A. MACDONALD: For me, building on the comments across, I'm just wondering: Are there any things that the government has done over the last year or two that you could share - some examples of the anti-racism and equity work that's being done across the government?

THE CHAIR: Deputy Minister Thomas.

CANDACE THOMAS: I'm going to start, but I do think there's much to talk about, so I am going to turn to Christine to add to what I will share with you.

One of the things I will mention, of course, is the African Nova Scotian Justice Institute when we talk about work that's being done with community, and that it is being led by community. That is a significant part of what will be the African Nova Scotian justice action plan. That institute is stood up now with \$4.5 million, I believe. In July 2021, the Province provided \$4.8 million in funding to launch the institute. Then in December 2022, to continue and to make sure that we're furthering that important work, the Province

provided an additional \$4.1 million in funding to support operational costs through to March 2026. That's one very key and significant piece of work that is being done out of and funded by the Department of Justice with our partners in the African Nova Scotian community.

Did you want to add to that, Christine?

THE CHAIR: Ms. Gibbons.

CHRISTINE GIBBONS: As you'd see in the strategy, there's a significant amount of work that's also happening across government. The Department of Education and Early Childhood Development is continuously revising and reviewing their curriculum to add in appropriate components for our Indigenous and Mi'kmaw communities, African Nova Scotian communities, and the 2SLGBTQIA+ community. We have the Environmental Racism Panel that our office is working with the Department of Environment and Climate Change, and we have all of the work happening within the Accessibility Directorate. So there's a significant amount of work that's happening across government right now in this area.

THE CHAIR: I have MLA Ince, MLA Craig, and then MLA Hansen.

MLA Ince.

HON. TONY INCE: My question would be to both the deputy minister and Ms. Gibbons. In your remarks, you quoted 1,200 engagements within the community, with 70 communities. I'd like to know - because those numbers were quoted back in 2021 - is that additional, or are those the same numbers you're working with?

THE CHAIR: Who would like to begin with that one? Ms. Gibbons.

CHRISTINE GIBBONS: Yes, we were trying to be very intentional about the language there. The engagement that those numbers are quoting is around the Act that did occur in 2021. What we found, when we did that engagement, was that we got such fulsome feedback from community, that we thought it would be disrespectful to go back out and ask the same questions again for the strategy.

What we were able to do was take what community told us during those legislation engagements and build the strategy from that, and then validate certain pieces with specific communities - rather than going out and doing a wholesale new engagement, just asking folks what they would like in this area.

THE CHAIR: Deputy minister, did you want to add to that yourself?

Deputy Minister Thomas.

CANDACE THOMAS: The one thing I would add to that - there was additional engagement done, I believe, on the definitions portion specifically for the strategy, if I'm not mistaken. Then there were also other communities where there were additional engagements very recently undertaken before the actual strategy was released and finalized. I think that's correct, is it? (Interruption) Yes. Okay.

THE CHAIR: MLA Craig, you're next.

HON. STEVE CRAIG: Thank you again for being here today. I was married 48 years ago, and my best man was gay. I'm the proud father and future father-in-law of a same-sex couple. So it's very near and dear to my heart, as with many people, these topics we have today.

I'd like to talk a little bit about and delve a little bit more into community. Specifically, the strategy contains Nova Scotia's first action plan dedicated to the two-spirit, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and/or questioning, intersex, asexual, plus the numerous ways that people choose to be self-identifying. Can you tell me a little bit more about the work being done with this community to develop the action plan?

THE CHAIR: Deputy Minister Thomas.

CANDACE THOMAS: I am going to ask Christine to add to this, but it is really important work that we are finally getting to address the issue. We know it is becoming even more and more of great concern as we listen to some of the challenges and some of the views that are being expressed today.

The strategy - we do have a dedicated individual within OEA who is leading the work with respect to the rainbow community. That work is just getting started and under way, but I know some things have taken place as far as getting engaged with community.

The one thing I want to make sure I note, and that all of you are aware of, is that the work we're doing with the 2SLGBTQIA+ community is that we're making sure intersectionality is very intentional. There are lots of other different groups who are part of that rainbow community, and we can't lose sight of the fact that if we're not intentional around that, we can end up with a plan and a strategy that does not speak for the multiplicity of voices that are part of that community.

With that, I'll ask Christine to just add to what's happening right now with that work.

THE CHAIR: Ms. Gibbons.

CHRISTINE GIBBONS: We're very privileged to be doing this work. As the deputy minister mentioned, it's very early days, but we have been engaged with a number

of organizations, as well as individuals within the community, as we do that initial research phase in determining how we should engage with the community to ensure that we get that authentic first voice - given the diversity of the community itself, and the intersectionality within and amongst the community.

[1:45 p.m.]

We've been doing a lot of informal conversations with organizations and individuals who are either part of the community or work with the community. We're also doing a significant reach-out across government. There are a number of departments that are already involved in initiatives serving the 2SLGBTQIA+ community. We really want to have a good sense of what the opportunities are, what the challenges are, before we dive into a full engagement on this work.

Once we have that initial research in place and we have a plan, then we will be going out to meaningfully engage with the community and to really get the work started.

THE CHAIR: MLA Hansen.

SUZY HANSEN: I also want to say that I can attest to the work that was being done. It was purely intentional and genuine in the outrage and the uptick of information. I will say that was truly something that folks really appreciated, and they felt like they were being heard.

I also want to say that within the piece of legislation that was brought forward here in the Spring, it didn't speak to the voices completely of what they had asked. When I say that legislation creates action, well, they had asked for all of those things to be in legislation. So I just wanted to make that point - because that was what they had asked for, not a strategy. I'm grateful that there is a strategy that is an outcome of the conversations. I also want to remind folks that engaging marginalized, often forgotten, and harmed folks can cause a lot of additional strain and distrust.

The strategy says: "In 2023/24, the Department of Justice . . . will work with the Nova Scotia Human Rights Commission and communities to address community concerns relating to how hate-motivated crimes under the Criminal Code of Canada and the Nova Scotia Human Rights Act are reported and handled, and concerns relating to acts of hate that may not meet the criminal threshold."

Many communities have experienced shocking but not surprising examples of hate-motivated actions. This only says that the DOJ will address these issues. What specifically is the DOJ doing about hate-motivated crimes?

THE CHAIR: Deputy Minister Thomas.

CANDACE THOMAS: Thank you for that very thoughtful question. Again, we're very mindful of the fact, of course, that the Criminal Code is federal jurisdiction and that hate-motivated crimes are just that - they are actually crimes. They're criminal in act and the police are required to respond to any criminal activity that people may be experiencing.

The thought is that we would work with the Nova Scotia Human Rights Commission around possibilities of what can be done when there are acts that don't quite meet the threshold of a crime that is chargeable under the Criminal Code. That work is yet to begin, so it is one of those aspirational items - I do have to admit - that is in the strategy where the work will be undertaken starting this year, it is hoped, and that the dialogue is going to take us where it does.

So we're not quite sure. If we have to have conversations with our federal colleagues, we have those established relationships as well. So the department will engage with the federal Department of Justice if need be, and perhaps even work across with the federal-provincial-territorial table that we're also a part of if, in fact, much of the work has to happen at the federal level with the Criminal Code. So more dialogue to happen on that one.

THE CHAIR: Our next round of questioners will be MLA Arab, MLA MacDonald, and MLA Sheehy-Richard.

HON. PATRICIA ARAB: I'm sorry to keep jumping around in the strategy but I want to go back to the rainbow community and speak specifically to prideHealth. We know that the strategy mentions prideHealth, and we know that in this fiscal year, more money was allocated for prideHealth. But in speaking with the community, one of the bigger issues has been staffing capacity.

My question is: Do we know if any of these extra funds were allocated specifically for capacity, and has there been progress? If not, is there a conversation of additional funding for next year's fiscal year that will specifically address prideHealth staffing capacity issues?

THE CHAIR: Mr. Ariyo.

JOHN ARIYO: I know that the capacity around prideHealth - I wouldn't be able to answer that question in terms of what would be allocated for next year. I know that from the point of view of the health equity framework, we engaged with prideHealth and many other 2SLGBTQIA+ community, but your specific question is something that we'll have to get back to you on.

THE CHAIR: MLA MacDonald.

JOHN A. MACDONALD: I'm not sure who this one is going to go to. As we know, Nova Scotia is the first province to introduce legislation that addresses hate, racism, and inequity. Do you think the introduction of this legislation is an opportunity for this province to become a leader in this space?

THE CHAIR: We'll ask the leader. Deputy Minister Thomas.

CANDACE THOMAS: This is probably another one of those areas where Nova Scotia just punches way above its weight. As far as leading, even in the approach to how the legislation came about - the fact that government was open to having an all-party committee develop the legislation, and all voices from all of the caucuses being part of developing the legislation, but also addressing the hate component. There is obviously some legislation across the country that deals with parts of what we're doing, but they're not grappling with the entire picture.

The fact that Nova Scotia is out there leading the way - but because we're doing it because it's the right thing to do, not really just because we want to say that we're leaders. The issues that were identified have been addressed. We're working in earnest with those and the legislation - and now the strategy in support of that as well is in place. We should be pleased with that, but we will not rest on any laurels because it means we have a lot of work to do - a lot of work ahead of us.

THE CHAIR: MLA Sheehy-Richard.

MELISSA SHEEHY-RICHARD: I'm sticking with my theme, health equity, which is really important to me. When we talk about a lot of the collaboration and the consultation partnerships that are involved in the work that you're doing, can you expand any more on who these partners are when it comes to implementing the framework? Who's at the table, so to speak, as you're developing this framework?

THE CHAIR: Mr. Ariyo.

JOHN ARIYO: We think we see our partnership in threefold. One has to do with the core health equity partners. I've talked about the six partners before involving DHW and the rest of the partners within the health system. We see those health system partners involved. We'll also be working with broader health groups and associations like Doctors Nova Scotia, for example, and many others in that category. That's another bucket, so over time they'll be engaged as part of the framework. Also, we'll be engaging with them in terms of implementation too.

As a broader community at large, from different groups and associations that we've talked to and many other community hubs within the province - including newcomers and many of the other equity groups - over time we'll be talking to all of them. They've been involved as part of this work itself. On our engagement alone, we had close to 2,000 people

and voices as part of the health equity framework. But it's not just about listening to what people have to say about that; it's also about how we collectively implement this. The actual implementation is key.

I see the health system partners leading this, so that's what we're doing. At the same time, we have a lot of other health associations and groups that we're talking to. It's a large community effort - I will say system effort. Also relating to the deputy minister's point earlier, within government itself, this is not just about DHW and the health partners within government. We'll also be engaging with other departments as well to make sure we use a whole-of-government approach to implementing that framework in collaboration with the Office of Equity and Anti-Racism Initiatives.

It's a broad-based approach. Folks we've talked to, we'll be keeping them engaged as part of what comes out of this. Talking to communities and getting all those voices into this work - it's a disservice if we don't go back to let them know how we're implementing this, and what actions have been taken. We'll be taking that into consideration as we move forward with the implementation.

THE CHAIR: MLA Ince.

HON. TONY INCE: For the deputy minister: In your remarks, you commented that the new structure of the OEA is similar to the office of African Nova Scotian Affairs, the office of Acadian Affairs and Francophonie, and so on. My question is this: How is it similar to ANSA, and why?

THE CHAIR: Deputy Minister Thomas.

CANDACE THOMAS: The structure now is aligned, or more in line with, ANSA in that ANSA is like a division of the Department of Communities, Culture, Tourism and Heritage. It is not a stand-alone, separate office. The same thing would apply with the Advisory Council on the Status of Women, which is part of the Department of Community Services. They're not separate and discrete departments. Now, the OEA - the Office of Equity and Anti-Racism Initiatives - being a part of the Department of Justice really is aligned, and has been set up the same way as those other offices that I've referred to.

THE CHAIR: MLA Ritcey, then MLA Hansen, and then MLA Arab.

DAVE RITCEY: I'm going to bring it back to the strategy aspect of this. Can you share a bit with us - some successes and milestones achieved to date through the work of the strategy?

THE CHAIR: We're going to look to Ms. Gibbons, I think, to answer this one. Ms. Gibbons.

CHRISTINE GIBBONS: As we've mentioned a couple of times, it is very early days. We're a couple of months in. But we are very happy to be able to speak to you about the community network that we had launched by the legislated deadline of July 31st of this year. It's in its very initial stages because it's being designed to respond to the feedback that we get from members within the network. We have a general concept of what we'd like the network to look like, and that would be a space where community can share with one another some great resources or plans that they have, as well as a place for them to connect with government.

For example, if one community has done a really great campaign to address Islamophobia, then they could share that campaign with other areas of the province, or they could share the mechanism behind that campaign that could be applied to another type of hate, inequity, or racism.

We'll continue to build that community network with the members as that comes together, but that was officially set up in July.

As we've talked about, we've already done some significant work with our municipalities and villages. We've had two sessions with them so far where we've gotten some really good feedback about what would make sense to them in terms of the plans that we should put in place, and what they need from us to help support those plans being put in place - as well as the provision of the funding of \$1.185 million. That was a significant success for us in supporting them in this important work.

THE CHAIR: MLA Hansen.

SUZY HANSEN: There are a number of items that were put forward as part of the all-party committee that were not adopted as part of the bill or as part of the strategy. These are all community-based proposals that community had said that they wanted to see. They were not put forward as part of the strategy. We know that it will move the needle on equity and anti-racism in Nova Scotia.

Two of them that come to mind are the commitment to implement and regularly report on progress toward the Calls to Action of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and the Calls for Justice from the Inquiry Into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, and two was a commitment to begin conversations about reparations together with Black Nova Scotians. As we know, acknowledging things can also cause a catalyst for action.

I'm wondering why this was not included in the strategy.

THE CHAIR: Deputy Minister Thomas.

[2:00 p.m.]

CANDACE THOMAS: The strategy is built on what OEA heard as part of its engagement with community. I can't speak to what isn't in the strategy. I know we put out a *What We Heard* document. There is reference, I believe, to reparations in the strategy document. I'll ask Christine to confirm that for me. But certainly government will have to take the decision on something like reparations in a significant way before something was put into a strategy document.

Anything to add?

THE CHAIR: I almost said "MLA Gibbons." (Laughter)

Ms. Gibbons.

CHRISTINE GIBBONS: Sorry to correct you but no, reparations are not mentioned in the strategy. Those amendments were put forward to the all-party committee through the House as part of the processing of the bill. We did definitely consider those as part of our work. The essence of some of the community concerns that were heard were able to be built into other components in the strategy.

THE CHAIR: MLA Arab.

HON. PATRICIA ARAB: The strategy also highlights a commitment to work with Women and Gender Equality Canada to establish a bilateral agreement to support the implementation of the National Action Plan to End Gender-Based Violence. This supports the commitment of the federal government and the provincial government to implement the recommendations given by the Mass Casualty Commission. It also works to address some of the inequalities that exist within the justice system on gender-based violence - specifically perpetrators of sexual assault using NDAs to cover up and silence victims.

I'm going to put it all in one. There are a couple of questions that I would suspect are going to be answered, if at all, by a couple of you. Where are you in the negotiations for the Action Plan? What are you doing in the interim before the plan is implemented? What rationale has been given to you as to why the government does not want to ban NDAs in the use of sexual assault cases?

THE CHAIR: Deputy Minister Thomas.

CANDACE THOMAS: I'll answer the last part first and then I'll turn it over to Christine to maybe comment on the general work that's being done. Obviously, taking an all-of-government approach to gender-based violence, intimate partner violence, sexual-based violence and government's decision not to proceed with legislation regarding NDAs does not impede or affect that work. There are extensive and expansive initiatives under

way, not only through the Status of Women, but also with work that's being done within the Department of Justice itself.

I just wanted to say that government's decisions on legislation are just that. We can't substantiate for you what kinds of decisions are made with respect to the legislative process. That's a political process. As far as more generally and broadly, and how we're addressing intimate partner violence - which, of course, is dealt with in a huge theme in the Mass Casualty Commission report - there is a lot of work that's going to be done and that is being done right now. I'll just ask Christine if she wanted to add anything to that.

THE CHAIR: Ms. Gibbons.

CHRISTINE GIBBONS: I would just add that the work around the National Action Plan is actually being led by the Nova Scotia Advisory Council on the Status of Women, so I wouldn't be able to speak specifically to that. I would just add that gender-based violence - especially with respect to our 2SLGBTQIA+ community and our gender-diverse communities - will be part of the action plan that will come out of the strategy as well.

THE CHAIR: What was the third part of that question, just so . . .

PATRICIA ARAB: What's being done in the interim? I missed your answer to that.

CHRISTINE GIBBONS: On the National Action Plan?

PATRICIA ARAB: Yes.

CHRISTINE GIBBONS: I apologize, I can't speak to that because that's being led by the . . . (Interruption) Yes.

THE CHAIR: MLA Craig.

HON. STEVE CRAIG: Engagement and collaboration, I believe, are the things that we need to do as governments - and even the different orders of governments, the bureaucracy, the communities, and people. Engagement and collaboration - if you don't have that, then nothing happens. That's a firm belief of mine.

Could you walk us through the difference between community engagement and public engagement? They are different. Can you tell me about some of the work that is being done, and why both are relevant to the work and the strategy?

THE CHAIR: Ms. Gibbons, the deputy minister is pointing to you. (Laughter)

CHRISTINE GIBBONS: In terms of community versus public engagement, typically how we see it is if you do broad public engagement on a topic, you may very

likely miss some of the voices of the underrepresented and underserved communities. We are very intentional about the type of engagement that we do. We actually base our engagement on three guiding principles that come from the communities we serve. First would be two-eyed seeing, where you weave in Indigenous ways of knowing with western ways of knowing, and understanding how we need to apply that to engagements and understanding privileges, power dynamics, things like that - and how they can influence how we're doing that engagement.

Sankofa, which speaks about remembering the lessons of the past. The deputy minister had mentioned we're not the first in this space to do this work, absolutely. We recognize that in every room that the office enters. We are very mindful of bringing those lessons that have been learned to the table, and using those and recognizing those within those conversations.

The third piece would be ubuntu, which is a community principle around the interconnectedness of our humanity. None of us exists on an island. We need to be in every single one of our conversations with community, being appreciative of those interconnections, and how that manifests in the work that's to come from whichever topic we're talking about.

We very much do more community engagement than public engagement, because we're typically in a very unique conversation with either a specific community or a collective of communities when we're looking at the intersectionality. We do it with those guiding principles in mind.

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

HON. TONY INCE: Deputy minister, I'm going back to the Office of Equity and Anti-Racism Initiatives and the similarities between that and African Nova Scotian Affairs. Acadian Affairs and Francophonie is a separate entity - so is Gaelic Affairs. Is there any discussion or talk about African Nova Scotian Affairs being its own separate office, given the distinctness of the community?

THE CHAIR: Deputy Minister Thomas.

CANDACE THOMAS: If I'm not mistaken, I believe both of those offices - Acadian Affairs and Francophonie - are part of the Department of Communities, Culture, Tourism and Heritage as well. They're not separate departments or offices. Again, that can be corrected for the record, and we can bring that back and actually confirm for all of you what the status is of those aspects of the work that's being done by government.

I'm not sure what else I can add to what I've shared already as far as ANSA's work. We don't determine the department. The deputy minister doesn't determine those types of

changes or decisions, so I'm not really able to answer, unfortunately - I apologize, the second part of your question.

THE CHAIR: MLA Ritcey.

DAVE RITCEY: This is for Ms. Stegen. With community engagement happening and consultation, is there any connection with your work with municipalities, villages, and the other prescribed public sector bodies and the Accessibility Directorate's work with them?

THE CHAIR: Ms. Stegen.

DAWN STEGEN: There is quite a bit of work that we do with prescribed public sector bodies. In addition to municipalities and villages, in total there are 107 prescribed public sector bodies. The municipalities and villages are required, like other PPSBs - I'll use that term to refer to prescribed public sector bodies - to have multi-year accessibility plans, to have them posted, and to have advisory committees.

This is an important commitment under collaboration. We can't achieve an accessible Nova Scotia without municipalities and villages. The work that we undertake with them - similar to the Office of Equity and Anti-Racism Initiatives - is a bit of a community of practice. We also host monthly webinars for prescribed public sector bodies - the most recent one being on the built environment standard, as that has been posted for public comment. They recently had a webinar on emergency preparedness for persons with disabilities. The tools and resources have been an important part of our work with them. Again, they contribute to the design of those and what the focus is - whether it be tools and templates.

I would say that what's important to the relationship and the capacity-building going forward also is our relationship with the Federation and the Association of Municipal Administrators Nova Scotia. We were fortunate a year ago to enter into a two-year agreement with AMANS where they have now an accessibility capacity-building coordinator who can support communities - not just finish off their plans. Ninety per cent of municipalities and villages have completed their plans - 10 per cent to go. They're supporting us that way as well, and of course, the conversations that we're having with the Office of Equity and Anti-Racism Initiatives to ensure that as plans are required for both anti-racism, equity and accessibility - how we can be mindful of supporting the municipalities and villages together.

THE CHAIR: I believe, Deputy Minister Thomas, you'd like to add to that?

CANDACE THOMAS: Not to that. I just wanted to confirm because we have just checked the status of Acadian Affairs and Francophonie as a division of the Department of

Communities, Culture, Tourism and Heritage. I'm just saving me a letter to write back to the committee. (Laughter)

THE CHAIR: Thank you. We appreciate that.

MLA Hansen.

SUZY HANSEN: The strategy says that the "Department of Advanced Education will lead the development of a memorandum of understanding . . . between the province and universities that prioritizes partnerships with Mi'kmaq and Indigenous people and continues the commitment to advance the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's calls to action that pertain to post-secondary education in Nova Scotia."

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission released its calls to action in 2015, which is eight years ago. I'm wondering: When will this MOU be in place?

THE CHAIR: Deputy Minister Thomas.

CANDACE THOMAS: Because that is being dealt with by another department, I don't have the answer for you. That is something that I can make an enquiry on, though, and send back through the committee.

THE CHAIR: Thank you. It's noted. We'll go to MLA Sheehy-Richard, then MLA Arab, and then MLA Coombes.

MELISSA SHEEHY-RICHARD: When we talk about that investment of that \$1.18 million, I don't know if we discussed how municipalities access that or how they become aware of this. Is there a way that I can help connect my municipality since they're in the early stages of forming this committee? If you could just elaborate a little bit more on that.

THE CHAIR: Ms. Gibbons.

CHRISTINE GIBBONS: We announced the funding in July with the release of the strategy. We are working with the Association of Municipal Administrators Nova Scotia to determine how to best distribute that funding. We've actually been working with the Accessibility Directorate, given the existing work that they've been doing with AMANS, to support municipalities on the accessibility commitments. More information is to come on that. We don't actually have a specific way to access that funding yet, but it will be very soon.

THE CHAIR: MLA Arab.

HON. PATRICIA ARAB: I want to talk about the Health Equity Framework, and specifically how it will apply to members of different ethnic groups and different minority

groups. I belong to a specific ethnic group and the way that we go to hospitals - the way that a loved one is in hospital or if a loved one is dying - our traditions and actions are quite different than possibly the average Nova Scotian.

[2:15 p.m.]

It's been really hard to find consistencies within the health care system. There are certain floors of certain hospitals that have a great understanding and appreciation of a lot of people - pre-COVID - coming and having waiting rooms available. Then there are other floors and other hospitals, particularly outside HRM, where the experiences have not been that great. This is just how you come into a hospital as a visitor, so not even scratching the surface of how you're treated as a patient or anything that is overtly discriminatory against you.

I guess, in a general way, as you're digging into this strategy and this framework, what are you guys doing specifically to address a uniformity across the province so that everybody's experiences - no matter what floor of what hospital or what city or what town you are in - there is going to be this understanding that goes across all of the staff?

THE CHAIR: Mr. Ariyo.

JOHN ARIYO: Through the Health Equity Framework itself, like I said before, we do have the assistant partners that have been set up for this. Part of our work right now is to start to do policy audits across our hospital system and our health system. It's one of the recommendations in the framework itself. Like I said, three themes, 35 recommendations.

There are different experiences from different Nova Scotians, based on race, ethnicity, gender, or being a newcomer to Nova Scotia. We recognize all of that. Part of the work now with the Health Equity Partnership table, involving all of those six partners, will be starting to do more policy audits. We'll be looking into all our policies across the board to see particularly which might not be meeting its mark when it comes to being culturally safe and sensitive to the needs of different racialized Nova Scotians and other equity-seeking populations.

Work will be ongoing. Like I said earlier, we're working now to do the implementation plan for this, and the audits will be part of it.

THE CHAIR: MLA Coombes.

KENDRA COOMBES: Listening to the answers that have been provided here, I have some concerns. One of my biggest concerns here is that it seems to me that the Office of Equity and Anti-Racism Initiatives cannot speak to the details and elements of the strategy that are within other departments. That gives questions of who is accountable to making sure that things get done, and who is reporting to whom?

My understanding of how something like this should or could be implemented would be that, yes, the departments are responsible for implementation of the strategy and the plans, but would report to the Office of Equity and Anti-Racism Initiatives as things are due throughout the entire process - not a year or in the annuals, but for the entire process, every step of the way, so that the office is able to know where departments are at every step.

Who is accountable for this strategy at the end of the day?

THE CHAIR: Deputy Minister Thomas.

CANDACE THOMAS: This is an all-of-government approach to the strategy. The strategy does relate to work that is being done in all of the various departments across government. OEA is certainly not equipped to be accountable for the work. We're there as another department - and minister and deputy minister - responsible and accountable to the public for that work.

As far as reporting out, there are reporting requirements in some of those other initiatives. Some of them are significant initiatives for those departments. Some of them may be smaller. Parts of what is in the strategy are certainly for OEA to be 100 per cent accountable for, and to be reporting out in the annual report and otherwise throughout the year as we deal and work with community.

For example, the data standards. The data standards are being developed as part of the strategy. All departments will be responsible for working within the standards that are set for data collection when we talk about race-based data and the other types of information that government requires in order to improve on policies and the work that's actually happening.

There is a combination of accountability. We are all obviously accountable to the public - needless to say. But to say that the Minister responsible for the Office of Equity and Anti-Racism Initiatives be solely responsible for accounting for all of the equity and anti-racism work being done across government is not something that is contemplated at that time.

That being said, I take your comment. It is something that we'll take back and discuss to see if there are perhaps any changes that we have to look at in how we're doing the work. I do think hearing what other people are seeing when they look at the report is important. It's also important for us to hear you, and part of the reason why we're here today. Thank you very much for that feedback.

THE CHAIR: I have MLA Ritcey, MLA Hansen, and MLA Ince next.

DAVE RITCEY: Again, I'll go back to Ms. Stegen around the topic of accessibility. Can you tell us where we are in the process of becoming fully accessible in the province by 2030?

THE CHAIR: Ms. Stegen.

DAWN STEGEN: The goal is an accessible Nova Scotia by 2030. It is an aspirational goal, and we're making very good progress. There are six elements of Access by Design 2030 - six priority areas. Access by Design 2030 is the implementation plan for the Act. By the end of this calendar year, we will have all six standards that are identified in Access by Design at some form of development.

Currently, we're out for public review on the proposed built environment standard. Later this Fall, the public will see recommendations from the Employment Standard Development Committee. Also, the government committee has come together to start reviewing recommendations that were submitted to the minister for an education standard. Recruitment for the public transportation standard development committee will also be out later this Fall. We're very busy on the standard side.

On the evaluation side, which is another priority area, we're preparing the response to the Act review. In May 2023, the first independent review of the Accessibility Act was completed. Forty-eight recommendations were made by Dr. Katie Aubrecht. Again, this is where our attention is under evaluation and monitoring.

I also want to mention, under that priority area, we're working closely with the disability community on a quality-of-life index for persons with disabilities. It will be the first of its kind in North America. When we talk about an accessible Nova Scotia by 2030, we should be measuring quality of life. That work is getting under way. Again, we're very pleased to be working with Engage Nova Scotia, using their data along with the disability community.

Other priority areas include collaboration. We talked about prescribed public sector bodies. We're close to, I think about 90 to 92 per cent of all the accessibility plans posted and continue to provide support there. Then we also have a commitment to government leading by example. Last year, government approved the Government of Nova Scotia Accessibility Plan, which includes all 26 departments. That's a three-year plan.

Finally, I'll mention awareness and capacity building, which is so important to a multi-pronged approach to shifting culture and transformational change. If you catch it on social media or television, we have a campaign called Access Includes Everyone. I'll just tie back to municipalities and villages again, because we just produced a fourth element of the campaign, which features a beach in northern Nova Scotia and a whole new series of posters and social media. We couldn't have done that campaign without the municipalities

and villages being a partner. They've said from day one that they need those resources produced provincially so that they can use them in community.

We're making good progress. I'm certain that our standards will be enacted by 2030.

THE CHAIR: MLA Hansen.

SUZY HANSEN: One of the things we know is that if there's not a high-level person accountable for moving work forward, it can be tough to get things done. The strategy says the Office of Equity and Anti-Racism Initiatives will be assigned as the lead within government tasked to work with the 2SLGBTQIA+ community to address their needs. OEA will work with community over the next year to develop an action plan to address needs identified by the community. Ms. Gibbons, you mentioned that earlier.

I just wanted to clarify this. Do we take this to mean that the Minister of Justice is responsible for 2SLGBTQIA+ affairs? Can the office provide details about how it will work with community to develop an action plan, and which minister is responsible for the action plan to be made public?

THE CHAIR: Deputy Minister Thomas.

CANDACE THOMAS: Yes, I can say absolutely, because OEA is responsible for that component of the work that government is doing. We are going to be working with community to develop that plan in the accountability report that is produced by OEA annually. It will definitely be reporting on what that strategy looks like, what the plan looks like, and how we've engaged. Christine can probably give a little bit more information. I think she may have already, but why don't you reiterate the plan that's in process right now for engaging with community?

THE CHAIR: Ms. Gibbons.

CHRISTINE GIBBONS: As I mentioned earlier, we are in what we're calling the research phase of this work. What we have been doing is a number of informal reach-outs to community members, as well as organizations that support community, to really get a good sense of how we should appropriately engage with this community, given the diversity, and the challenges and opportunities that they live with. We are just at that stage right now.

Based on that feedback, we will actually create the plan to create the plan. We really want to make sure we get this right. We appreciate that many individuals within the 2SLGBTQIA+ community have been underserved and underrepresented in our work as government, and broadly in society as well. So we really want to make sure that we're

working with community to even develop the plan to develop the plan, rather than just sort of coming up with it in our office and hoping it works for the community.

THE CHAIR: MLA Ince.

HON. TONY INCE: I think this question might be for Ms. Gibbons. Can you expand on how the Office of Equity and Anti-Racism Initiatives is collecting the race-based data and how it's going to be used?

THE CHAIR: Ms. Gibbons.

CHRISTINE GIBBONS: As in the legislation and in the strategy, we have committed to developing an equity and race-based data standard. Community has told us it's no longer okay for us to say we're not sure if there's an overrepresentation or disproportionate services going to different communities.

What we've been doing over the past year is working with communities to validate the types of identifiers that could be used within the data standard. These would be for our racialized communities, as well as our equity communities - the 2SLGBTQIA+ community, persons with disabilities. We've been focused on getting the identifiers correct and validated by community.

We are now moving into a phase of - because this identifies how this information will be collected across government but also how the data will be used. That's equally important for communities - to know how their data is going to be used. We want to be able to build community involvement into the use and interpretation of the data. We are at the stage now where we are working across government with different departments that are already collecting some type of equity and race-based data.

Once we have a better sense of what's happening right now, then we can finalize the standard to be able to say to all departments: This is how you shall collect data and this is how you shall use data to ensure that it's culturally appropriate and safe for the communities.

THE CHAIR: MLA Arab, you're next.

HON. PATRICIA ARAB: In collaboration with DOJ and ANSA, there is supposed to be a plan released this year that will help address Recommendation 4.17 in the *Halifax, Nova Scotia: Street Checks Report*, which calls for government to address racial bias in other parts of the criminal justice system beyond street checks.

Bringing it back to the issue of trust and the issue that most of these groups we're talking about today for whom the strategy is meant to protect and help have lost trust in government - and here we are in October and there is still no report released. My two-part

question is: Do we still expect it in 2023? Also: How can this one particular issue be addressed within the strategy as a whole or help strengthen that issue of trust?

[2:30 p.m.]

THE CHAIR: Deputy Minister Thomas.

CANDACE THOMAS: The commitment to actually implement the recommendations that are the responsibility of government coming out of the Wortley report is real. Government has committed - and that is part of Minister Johns' mandate letter - to implement the recommendations coming out of the Wortley report. That work is well under way. I'm not familiar with each reference of the number, so I'm not sure which recommendation that is, but I can say that we track, we are monitoring, and we are reporting on a regular basis on the status of the work coming out of Wortley.

There is a community research data committee that community members are a part of from across the province, and also other stakeholders and partners. Police are around the table. The Nova Scotia Human Rights Commission is there. The Department of Justice is there. Most importantly, as I said, community voices are there in earnest working on those recommendations coming out of the Wortley report.

THE CHAIR: MLA Ritcey and then MLA Craig.

DAVE RITCEY: Back to Ms. Stegen. What are the next steps in the accessibility plan? How does it fit into the equity and anti-racism strategy?

THE CHAIR: Ms. Stegen.

DAWN STEGEN: It's a great question. The next steps in the plan - there are a couple of plans that we follow, and that's Access by Design 2030, and then there's the Government of Nova Scotia Accessibility Plan for 2022-2025. I would say the biggest piece of work right now is the six standards. That's a huge obligation. It's complex, collaborative, iterative work, so it's really all hands on deck to keep moving that forward.

The other element of Access by Design 2030, which ties into the Government of Nova Scotia Accessibility Plan, is government leading by example. That is actually the sixth commitment in Access by Design 2030. So working across departments - whether it be with Department of Community Services and supporting the remedy work, working with Department of Public Works to do that needs assessment and auditing of buildings that we own across the province, working with Communications Nova Scotia on guidelines or policies related to communications being accessible. That's again an important part of where our team of staff are supporting other departments to keep moving forward. I would say it's diverse, our work going forward into 2024-25.

THE CHAIR: MLA Craig.

HON. STEVE CRAIG: Again, a fascinating and complex problem when you try to take something like this topic and organize it into nice compartmental boxes. When it comes to organization structures, a couple of the offices were mentioned. I like to think about what you do, your office does, and the strategy as being, if you will, the government's owner of this whole thing. Somebody's got to own it and ensure that other departments and other organizations are doing their job.

You can have somebody with a specific responsibility for African Nova Scotian Affairs, you can have somebody for disabilities, you can have the Office of L'nu Affairs, and so on. Who's looking at the gaps? Who's looking at the other things that might happen? That's where I think the strategy is important and sitting in the office that it does. Somebody is looking at it and engaging community, engaging people, and trying to figure out what we're missing. What are the positives of a particular organization or department or unit, and how can they be leveraged elsewhere? I don't think anybody up until this point has had that responsibility.

I see with one eye here, I see with another eye here because this is my role and responsibility. Nobody up until this point, I don't believe, had the ability or authority to look at the whole structure, and figure out where we have opportunities and challenges - and also, how we can help others. I want to tell you that I recognize in my own belief the importance and the significance of the Act and this office. I want to thank you for that.

I'm just one person who sits in the Legislature. Coming up a week from Thursday, we'll be sitting down for the Fall session and talking about these things again. We've got the Dismantling Racism and Hate Act passed by our government, and then we've got this strategy. It involved all government parties working together for Nova Scotians. All members in the Chamber ultimately take this and try to make it as best they can through the legislative process, but we all know that really comes down to that plus somehow putting that into action. I see this as a very significant catalyst for making change, and addressing it in such a way that we can all at least relate somewhat to it, and at the end of the day, we know where to go and say: What about this? What about that?

Why do you think this - especially this type of all-party collaboration - is so important to enable you to do the work that you want to do, with the authority and responsibility provided through government?

THE CHAIR: Ms. Gibbons or Deputy Minister Thomas - who would like to tackle that one first?

Deputy Minister Thomas.

CANDACE THOMAS: I'm going to ask for it be repeated - the actual nub of the question.

THE CHAIR: MLA Craig, maybe we'll just skip the intro before that, and just the questions at the end, please.

HON. STEVE CRAIG: Just before I do that, I'm going to do a little bit more. I've restricted myself to preamble quite a bit in all the committees I sit on. I took the liberty to stretch this out a bit, because it is so important. So I'm going to stop that.

What I'm going to say is that we've got the Act. It was passed by our government, and the strategy involved all parties. Why do you think this type of collaboration is necessary and needed? Does that shorten it up a bit?

THE CHAIR: Thank you. Deputy Minister Thomas.

CANDACE THOMAS: Thank you very much for the question and for the explanation on the front end. This type of work is critically important. Everyone has a role to play. I'll start by saying that. But as far as changing our society and dismantling something that has structurally been in place since colonization requires government to act. It requires government to act with intention, and for government to act in collaboration with other voices, with other people who have power and authority, with other people who can do things - which does mean all of you, honestly, in this room - and that we continue to support and work together to support the actual work that's being done in the trenches.

A lot of that is, yes, being done in government and in government departments, but we know that a lot of it is being done outside with not-for-profit organizations that have been on the ground forever, doing a lot with a little; with municipalities and towns and universities and colleges and lots of other bodies and people - and individuals, our neighbours, who care enough to do something differently.

It is critically important that our work be collective, and that we be open and honest, and talk to each other with respect, and that we actually listen to each other and that we move to get the work done. I've heard a lot about trust today, and I think you're absolutely right. There's a lot of mistrust in society for a lot of different people in a lot of different roles. The big thing we can do is show results.

I think as we continue to work in earnest, and obviously here, and work together, that people will see their lives getting a little bit better. People will see that they are actually respected. People will see that they're actually seen.

That's what we're here for. That's what we're all here for. Part of what we're doing at OEA with some of the overarching - I know we talk about things could get missed or fall between the cracks. Some of the bigger pieces that are truly owned at OEA are policy

driven. There is a huge policy think tank that is developing expertise around the work of the strategy and of the legislation that we have.

The fact that we're talking about getting to the foundational issues of how government works - meaning legislation, regulations, policies, and guidelines, and that there's going to be an equity lens put to that, and that we at OEA are the ones responsible for setting that out for all of government to follow - is critically important.

So yes, there is a bit of a hub, as far as there is something that is going to come out from OEA. I agree 100 per cent. This is government's. Government has to own this. Government has to know that it's not theirs alone. That's what it says in this strategy - that we have to work with others in order to get this work done. It is very meaningful work that we're all doing. Thank you very much for asking that question.

THE CHAIR: MLA Sheehy-Richard, and then MLA Hansen if we have time.

MELISSA SHEEHY-RICHARD: I'm still in awe of that beautiful answer. I have high respect for you and the work that you are doing, and I feel that it's in very good hands. I can't even remember what it is that I wanted to ask. When we talk about health equity and the framework, can you talk about how it would correspond to the pillars for the Action for Health? Is it interchangeable? Or how it's related?

THE CHAIR: Mr. Ariyo.

JOHN ARIYO: It is very coordinated with the Action for Health. That's actually a lens that we also used in developing the framework itself. There are about 20 actions in the Action for Health specifically speaking to equity communities, and things that we have to do around health equity. In fact, the Health Equity Framework itself is one of the actions in the Action for Health. They are all very related. They are all very coordinated and those solutions, every single one of them, has a health equity lens attached to it. As we're looking to implement the Action for Health itself - some of those health equity-related recommendations - we're also overlaying that with what we got from the Health Equity Framework to make sure that everything can be accounted for. They're very related. They're very coordinated.

THE CHAIR: MLA Hansen with just over two minutes.

SUZY HANSEN: I just want to point, out as did my colleague MLA Craig, we understand that this is meaningful work and there's a lot of work that is happening. When I'm reading the Equity and Anti-Racism Strategy, I notice a number of things that are not new but as was said earlier, these are things that have been happening, that have been working, or these are things that you've heard from the previous reports that are continuing on. I think that speaks true to why we need to move forward at a pace that is acceptable by people who are experiencing these types of things.

I say this because we didn't really get any timelines. I understand that it's going to be adaptable, and we need to move in the way that it needs to be moved. I also understand that folks in community have been waiting a long time for things to change. As we know, systemic racism and our foundations need to be cracked in order for us to get to where we need to be so folks can actually feel safe, respected and welcomed in all spaces. I just wanted to say that but as well, one of the things that I wanted to mention - I didn't really notice any new programs or new things that were happening within the strategy. Is there any new funding in particular that came from putting the strategy forward when it was presented?

THE CHAIR: Deputy Minister, with about 40 seconds, if you could. (Laughter)

CANDACE THOMAS: We've referred to monies that have been allocated for municipalities and villages so that they can get their strategies in place. There is also funding that was allocated within the budget of the Office of Equity and Anti-Racism Initiatives for the community network. That was money specifically for this work and the additional resource. Of course, we have someone now housed within the Office of Equity and Anti-Racism Initiatives to actually lead the rainbow community work. I think that's probably it before I get cut off. (Laughter)

THE CHAIR: That concludes our question and answer period here in the committee today. We would like to extend an opportunity for any of our guests to offer any closing remarks if they would like. Deputy Minister, would you have any closing remarks?

CANDACE THOMAS: I didn't prepare any, but I do want to thank each and every one of you for your interest in the work of the Office of Equity and Anti-Racism Initiatives - for your interest in equity work, period. Thank you for your honesty in how some of you shared with us today some of your own personal backgrounds around why this work is important. Thank you for allowing us an opportunity to be here and to speak with you. I just want to show our collective appreciation for that, so thank you very much.

THE CHAIR: We thank you all. Thanks for the wonderful discussion today on a topic that definitely affects all of us, whether we're urban or rural. It's Nova Scotia - we have to work together. Thank you very much for this afternoon. We'll take a two-minute recess to allow our guests to leave, and then we'll get back to our committee business.

[2:45 p.m. The committee recessed.]

[2:48 p.m. The committee reconvened.]

THE CHAIR: Order. We will proceed with our committee business. There was an annual report that needs to be moved that was sent out on September 13th and again on Friday. Is there any discussion around the annual report? Seeing no discussion, could I have somebody move? MLA Ritcey.

DAVE RITCEY: I move that the Human Resources Committee accept the annual report as written.

THE CHAIR: It was just mentioned to me that in the annual report, once the Speaker changes, that page will be changed in the annual report - just so we're all aware of that. We have a motion on the table.

Any discussion? All those in favour? Contrary minded? Thank you.

The motion is carried.

Any other business? Seeing no other business, our next meeting will be on November 7th from 1:00 p.m. to 3:00 p.m. The topic for that day is firefighters' mental health support, with witnesses from the Halifax Professional Firefighters Association - IAFF Local 268, Fire Service Association of Nova Scotia, and Office of Addictions and Mental Health.

There's a note here. We just found out today that the witness for the Office of Addictions and Mental Health will not be the chief officer, as specified by the motion in the agenda-setting. I'm just going to read my notes and then I'll come to you, MLA Arab. The office's deputy minister has suggested their physician lead and senior director would be appropriate, as well as their executive director.

Is there any discussion around that? MLA Arab.

HON. PATRICIA ARAB: Not really a discussion, but since we know that the House will be in session, and it's most likely that that meeting will have to be moved, is it possible for us to find another time when our witnesses can actually come?

THE CHAIR: I've been notified by the clerk that if the House is sitting, they've been notified that this meeting will be in the February time frame.

With that being said, if the House is sitting, we'll have our appointments to agencies, boards, and commissions anyway, but if there's no other business, I declare this meeting adjourned.

[The committee adjourned at 2:51 p.m.]