

HANSARD

NOVA SCOTIA HOUSE OF ASSEMBLY

STANDING COMMITTEE

ON

HUMAN RESOURCES

Tuesday, December 5, 2023

Committee Room

**Addressing the Need for Affordable Housing
and Increasing Housing Supply in Nova Scotia
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. Derek Mombourquette
Ali Duale
Kendra Coombes
Suzy Hansen

[Nolan Young was replaced by John White.]
[Derek Mombourquette was replaced by Braedon Clark.]
[Kendra Coombes was replaced by Susan Leblanc.]

In Attendance:

Gordon Hebb
Chief Legislative Counsel

Judy Kavanagh
Legislative Committee Clerk

WITNESSES

Department of Municipal Affairs and Housing

Byron Rafuse, Deputy Minister
Vicki Elliott-Lopez, Senior Executive Director
Pam Menchenton, Executive Director, Client Services
Brian Ward, Executive Director, Operations
Adrian Mason, Director, Housing Development and Partnerships

Affordable Housing Association of Nova Scotia

Michael Kabalen, Executive Director



House of Assembly
Nova Scotia

HALIFAX, TUESDAY, DECEMBER 5, 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'm Chris Palmer, MLA for Kings West and Chair of this committee. Today, in addition to reviewing the appointments to agencies, boards, and commissions, we will hear from the Department of Municipal Affairs and Housing, and the Affordable Housing Association of Nova Scotia regarding Addressing the Need for Affordable Housing and Increasing Housing Supply in Nova Scotia.

At this point, I'd like to ask everybody to please put your phones on silent. In case of an emergency, we will all use the Granville Street exit. At this point now, we'll go around the table, starting on my left, and ask all of our committee members to introduce themselves and their constituencies.

[The committee members introduced themselves.]

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

We in our Human Resources Committee always have some business to do before we get to our witnesses, so we will first be addressing our agencies, boards, and commissions appointments, and then address a small piece of business before we move into our question-and-answer period.

MLA MacDonald.

JOHN A. MACDONALD: For the Department of Advanced Education, I move that Kendrick Douglas, Adam Jamieson, Sandra Kanchuk, and Nancy Samson be appointed as Members of the Cape Breton University Board of Governors.

THE CHAIR: There's a 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 Advanced Education, I move that Ryan Grant and Jennifer Church be appointed as Directors of the Research Nova Scotia Corporation Board of Directors.

THE CHAIR: There's a 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 Service Nova Scotia, I move that Andrew MacDiarmid be appointed as Member, Funeral Director to the Board of Registration of Embalmers and Funeral Directors.

THE CHAIR: There's a 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 not least, for the Department of Service Nova Scotia, I move that Robert Faulkner and Babatunde Awoyiga be appointed as Members of the Nova Scotia Real Estate Commission.

THE CHAIR: There's a motion on the table. Any discussion?

All those in favour? Contrary minded? Thank you.

The motion is carried.

Before we get into our question-and-answer period, just one piece of business I will put forward is acknowledgement of some documents that have been received from the Department of Municipal Affairs and Housing. The deputy minister has asked that these be acknowledged at this meeting. We all would have received that. MLA Duale.

ALI DUALE: I just want to follow up on our agenda for ABCs. The committee has made a request for the council for the report. We have the report.

THE CHAIR: Yes.

ALI DUALE: I wish you had looked to my side. I've been raising my hand. I just want to respond to that report. We're grateful for the report and we would like to see this effort continue for the council. I just wanted to respond to the letter before we move the second agenda.

THE CHAIR: Thank you, MLA Duale. Do you want me to address that right now? It is on the agenda for after our committee meeting to discuss that correspondence after the witnesses. You're good with that? Excellent. I just wanted to make sure that we acknowledged those documents sent by the deputy minister. We all have those.

At this point, I will now go into our topic for the afternoon: Addressing the Need for Affordable Housing and Increasing Housing Supply in Nova Scotia. I would like to ask all of our witnesses who are appearing here today to take a second to introduce yourselves across the table, and then we'll get into opening statements.

I'll begin on my left with Mr. Ward.

[The witnesses introduced themselves.]

THE CHAIR: Thank you all. It's just come to my attention that we acknowledged the documents sent by the deputy minister, but I will just read them aloud now so that we have that.

The documents were Our Homes, Action for Housing: A Five Year Housing Plan; Nova Scotia's Provincial Housing Needs Assessment Report: Key Findings; the Deloitte HRM Housing Development Barrier Review; Progress Update: Oversight and Management of Government Owned Public Housing; List of Government Housing Announcements (2021-2023); and Happipad Testimonial.

I just wanted to make sure that those were all mentioned and acknowledged that they were sent by the deputy minister.

We would like to invite those who would like to give an opening statement to provide one now. We can begin with Deputy Minister Rafuse.

BYRON RAFUSE: Good afternoon, Chair and members of the committee. For all those who don't know me, I'm Byron Rafuse. I am the Deputy Minister of the Department of Municipal Affairs and Housing, and also the interim CEO of the Nova Scotia Provincial Housing Agency.

Over the last several weeks, I've had the opportunity to appear before the Public Accounts Committee multiple times related to the work of the department, specifically around the housing crisis. What I've taken from those opportunities, and what I believe I can safely say today, is that we can all agree on one thing: everyone deserves a safe and affordable place to live.

Over the past two years, the staff in my department, and across government, have been working collaboratively and diligently with others in government and community to understand the housing crisis, and respond in ways that address our significant needs - both now and in the future.

We know that increasing stock is the main cure for the crisis. It really comes down to supply and demand. That is not just an opinion. That statement is backed by the evidence collected through Nova Scotia's first ever comprehensive Provincial Housing Needs Assessment Report. This data represents the voice of over 20,000 Nova Scotians - one of the biggest sample groups we've seen in a long time for data collected in Nova Scotia.

With the help of this data, we have been able to chart a way forward, which is laid out in the housing plan: a \$1.7 billion dollar investment over five years in housing solutions for all Nova Scotians. The plan is focused on increasing housing supply, growing and sustaining affordable housing, and delivering programs people need.

The needs assessment told us that without intervention, we will have a gap of about 41,200 units by 2027-28. The plan explains how we are going to fill that gap, and when we do, we expect housing prices and rental rates to respond.

The housing plan is our road map for the way forward, but by no means have we sat idle while we developed the plan. Last week at our appearance at the Public Accounts Committee, and as the Chair has mentioned already, we provided members of that committee with a document of all the housing announcements we've done in our department over the last two years. When printed, this document is over 185 pages long. We did provide the document to this committee as well, as I said.

That document showcases things like ways to cut red tape to ensure development can proceed as quickly as possible. It shows that we've almost tripled the investment in rent supplements and doubled the people we helped in the last two years. In fact, just a few weeks ago we announced program changes that will ensure more seniors will be eligible for a rent supplement, and that those who are already receiving one will have more money in their pockets. It shows millions of dollars invested in the community housing sector to build their capacity to offer affordable housing options for their communities.

Through programs like the Community Housing Acquisition Program and the Community Housing Infrastructure and Repair Program, we are giving non-profits and community organizations the support they need, financial and otherwise, to preserve existing homes and strengthening organizations for future development and growth. The Community Housing Acquisition Program is unique to Nova Scotia and, as heard recently at the Canadian Alliance to End Homelessness Conference that was hosted recently here in Halifax, it is the envy of other jurisdictions.

Just recently, we announced the Secondary and Backyard Suites Incentive Program, which incentivizes people with up to \$25,000 dollars to share in the costs of building an affordable suite in their home or on their property to enhance stock. We are seeing significant interest in this program already, and it's only been on the books for about three weeks.

We are investing in modular housing options for health care workers, additional housing for students, and temporary housing for people experiencing homelessness. The Executive Panel on Housing in HRM has been hard at work creating the conditions to unlock 20,000 units to be built in Halifax over the next several years.

We have taken significant steps to improve and enhance public housing in Nova Scotia with the creation of the Nova Scotia Provincial Housing Agency last December. In fact, just four days ago, we acknowledged the one-year anniversary of the creation of the agency. In just one year of existence, the agency has made great progress in creating a new client service model, improvements to preserving existing stock, and investing in accessibility enhancements that will serve our most vulnerable residents. The agency also manages over 11,000 units. You are likely aware of our most recent announcement to add 222 new public housing units that will house 522 Nova Scotians. This alone is an \$83 million dollar investment. This is one of the largest investments in new housing builds since the 1990s.

I could continue, but I will respect my time limit and look forward to sharing more details with our time here today. I will conclude by saying that I know everyone in this room shares our vision for a strong Nova Scotia where all Nova Scotians will have access to safe, affordable housing that meets their diverse needs. I look forward to continuing our work together to support Nova Scotians.

We will now take your questions.

THE CHAIR: Thank you, Deputy Minister Rafuse. Before we get to our questions, I would like to invite Mr. Kabalen - I believe you had some opening remarks as well.

MICHAEL KABALEN: As the Executive Director at the Affordable Housing Association of Nova Scotia, I believe our organization is uniquely situated to understand the quantum of the problem that we're facing with our housing crisis, all the way from individuals who are currently experiencing homelessness to individuals who are just looking for an affordable place to live. We are builders, developers, acquirers of affordable housing in Nova Scotia. We are fortunate enough to be recipients of some of the many programs the deputy minister spoke of to make our growing portfolio of property possible.

We're also the local community entity for a federal program called Reaching Home. We receive a block of funding from the federal government that is targeted toward reducing homelessness in our community. We make strategic investments in other organizations, infrastructure and services to help serve those, and bring people out of homelessness in our community. In doing that, we are actually stewards of the data around those who experience homelessness in our community.

I want to throw some numbers at you because homelessness and the folks experiencing homelessness, I'm concerned are not going to be able to rise out of their dilemma with supply-based solutions. We need more for that community. I do want to applaud the investments made by this government through the Department of Community Services for the folks who are in that sector.

Today, 1,068 people in the HRM, where we keep that data, are experiencing homelessness. It's not just a number. These are people you probably walked past today coming into this building. These are people who are couch surfing, who are often in difficult situations. These are people who are struggling right now, and I think we want to put a face to when we talk about the solutions we need. These are the people we're trying to resolve.

Another number - 765. That's the number of people today who have been in that situation for six months or more. It's a long time. The reason we track that differently is because after six months, the outcomes become almost catastrophic. If you can resolve your homelessness within six months, you're risen out of that, and you won't return. But if

six months or more go beyond, it is a catastrophe to your life and it takes a lot more support for that individual.

[1:15 p.m.]

The last number, 263, are the active what we call “tri-comorbid.” These are folks who need additional support. It’s not just housing for them. It’s wraparound supports. It’s often medical. It’s often counselling. It’s support with addiction, support with mental illness, support with living with a disability that is required.

I want to rewind, because in October 2019, when we first started taking note of these numbers, the active number was 209, the chronic number was 134, and the tri-comorbidity was 113 - just a few years ago. That’s not this government’s fault. That is a testament to how quickly the problem has grown, and how, I think, complacent as a society we’ve been in paying attention and in responding in a meaningful way.

At AHANS we advocate for the solutions and the types of investments that are required to help these individuals, and help those who aren’t captured in this data who are afraid of being so.

Thank you for your time, Chair. I’m happy to answer your questions.

THE CHAIR: I believe that’s everybody who needs to make an opening statement. We will now proceed with our question-and-answer period. In our committee, we have a show of hands. That’s how I’ll keep track of the MLAs who will be asking questions of you.

We’d like to remind you to please wait until I identify you before you begin to speak. That way your microphone comes on. We will do our question-and-answer period until 2:40 p.m., and then we’ll allow for any kind of closing statements and some committee business we have to do after.

We will now proceed. I saw MLA Hansen, then MLA White, and then MLA Leblanc to begin. MLA Hansen, you’re first.

SUZY HANSEN: You did describe how the situation has worsened - Michael, with AHANS. You did describe how it has worsened compared to this time last year.

It was reported this weekend that an individual living in a Dartmouth tent encampment died outside. Are you or any other organization tracking deaths in this community, and can you speak to the scope of this problem?

THE CHAIR: Mr. Kabalen.

MICHAEL KABALEN: We are currently not tracking deaths in the data that we capture. I think that's a terrible situation with what happened. As a community, we're not the only service provider; in fact, we are not a front-line service provider. We are funding some of those frontline service providers. Unfortunately, it's a statistic that - ultimately, it's a terrible situation. What we're tracking is how we're doing with resolving the overall picture around homelessness. Unfortunately - that number comes out of the data, of course, but it's not currently tracked.

A lot of good people are doing a lot of good things, though. There are so many good not-for-profit organizations. There's been so much investment and so much attention on the challenge that we're facing. The reality is that it's still not enough. It's a testament to - when these things happen - how much more investment and how much more attention and how much more effort needs to happen in order to prevent these types of things from happening.

THE CHAIR: MLA White.

JOHN WHITE: The numbers that Michael laid out are staggering, absolutely, for sure. It's heartbreaking as well. I feel that there have been a lot of things that could have been done to prepare for this tsunami that's hitting us now, obviously.

I'm wondering if the department can tell us just how many units have been created, or are being created, through the Affordable Housing Development Program?

THE CHAIR: Maybe what I'll do is look for you, deputy minister, to direct the traffic where you think the best person to answer that would be.

BYRON RAFUSE: Mr. Mason.

THE CHAIR: Mr. Mason.

ADRIAN MASON: I think it's important to note that we have different programs targeted toward different people and different people's needs. The Affordable Housing Development Program is focused on all types of affordability, but it isn't specifically focused on deep affordability that would be targeting the type of people whom Mr. Kabalen has just been referring to.

The program - in answer to the question, last year it generated 308 new units, of which 225 were affordable. I think probably more noteworthy would be some of the other programs that are specifically targeted toward deeply affordable and supportive housing units. One would be the Rapid Housing Initiative, which is actually a federal program but relies on provincial support. There have been three rounds of the program. The first two rounds, government spent \$16.6 million creating 195 supportive housing units. We're

currently in the third round, which the funding hasn't been finalized yet, but is likely to generate an additional 63 units.

The other program that's targeting the deeply affordable, vulnerable communities, is the Community Housing Acquisition Program. In the first year, that has loaned over \$21 million to create 436 units, and 141 of those are being provided in partnership with our colleagues in the Department of Community Services to provide deeply affordable supportive housing solutions. Those are just two of the programs that are targeted more specifically at that.

Then there are other initiatives recently announced: a tiny home community over in Sackville, which will create another 52 units. That's just shy of a \$10 million investment.

THE CHAIR: For all committee members, I meant to mention that I will allow a follow-up if it's pertaining to your previous question. It's not an opportunity for another question. If it's another question, it'll go down the list again, but if it's a follow-up that's specific to your original question, I will allow for a follow-up.

MLA Leblanc.

SUSAN LEBLANC: Mr. Kabalen, I just want to clarify. You talk about the 1,068 on the by-name list. That by-name list is for people who are living rough or sleeping rough. Does that include people who are living in shelters?

MICHAEL KABALEN: The 1,068 includes individuals living in shelter, individuals who could be living outside or living rough, as you described it, MLA Leblanc. It could be people who are couch surfing. Essentially, that is the number that the system is capturing - people who are reaching out to shelters, to housing support workers, to people who are operating the homelessness support system and looking for help. It's likely the number is greater than that. It is definitely greater than that. Some people are dealing with their own homelessness if they're staying in a hotel and they have the financial means, or they have family to stay with. This is when people have nowhere else to go. They turn to the system, and they show up in our data.

SUSAN LEBLANC: Thank you for that clarification, but we know that list is sort of, as you mentioned, limited to Halifax. We also know that the crisis is more widely felt. Do you have any insight into what those kinds of numbers are for outside of the HRM?

MICHAEL KABALEN: We don't currently track the data outside of HRM. Homelessness outside of the capital area looks much different. There is a lot more couch surfing and a lot more on your own, in a sense. The system isn't as mature, as well supported, but we are hearing about pockets right across this province in a lot of the central towns. Bridgewater has gotten a lot of media attention recently, but many, many other communities are still also facing this challenge. It wouldn't be safe to extrapolate on a

particular number, but the problem is prevalent in every community in the province, and investment and support is required everywhere.

THE CHAIR: MLA Ritcey.

DAVE RITCEY: This question could be directed to the deputy minister, or he can pass it along to who he sees fit. It's around the modulars, and I guess they're available for emergency housing. How many are being currently used by the wildfire victims and the flood victims?

BYRON RAFUSE: I'm going to pass that on to Ms. Elliott-Lopez to provide details on some of that.

THE CHAIR: Ms. Elliott-Lopez, you look surprised. (Laughter)

VICKI ELLIOTT-LOPEZ: It's okay. Thank you for the question. Right now, we have four households using the modulars in Shelburne and Barrington areas, and we have one in Hammonds Plains area.

THE CHAIR: MLA Clark.

BRAEDON CLARK: Mr. Kabalen, I just wanted to ask you about the issues related to homelessness as you were talking about. If we have 1,068 people in HRM and the government has announced plans to have 200 Pallet shelters - 100 of them in the HRM - that's obviously a good thing. There are groups in Sackville. There are people here in the Grand Parade. I just walked by today. There are new ice fishing tents that different groups have put up. That's all wonderful. No one's going to dispute that, but I think there is also a missing force and scale to move this problem, which is government in some ways.

I don't think anyone would sit here and dispute that there is not enough physical space in HRM to have 1,000 people have somewhere to sleep. It's just a matter of where those places are, how they work, what all the nuts and bolts are that make sure that people have somewhere safe and warm to sleep. Will it be perfect? No, but would it be better than being outside? I would argue yes. I'm just curious what you think the government should be doing to get as many people off the streets and into a warm, safe place over the Winter. We know these Pallet shelters are not here, which is 10 per cent of the problem, and probably won't be here this calendar year.

When we get into January and February, the coldest months of the year, there will be hundreds of people living outside. Where should those people go and how do we move that process, so that we're not talking about this again in May, June and July, and saying, if only we knew what we know now?

THE CHAIR: Mr. Kabalen.

MICHAEL KABALEN: The solution to homelessness is housing. It's not fishing tents, it's not Pallet shelters, it's not camping, it's not someone's couch, it's not a conventional shelter. It's more housing. It's more accessible, affordable, and in often cases, supported housing. Unfortunately, despite the best efforts and the meaningful investments being made by government, it's still demonstrating it's not enough.

We hear about millions. Unfortunately, the challenge is going to require billions. I recognize the difficulty to procure that kind of money to resolve the challenge that we're facing. What you'll see is as the community and with the support of government continues to add solutions - whether that be permanent supportive housing through the Community Housing Acquisition Program, whether that be shelter capacity, or all the other responses that have been coming forward - that all ultimately just identifies more people who need more help. We're housing people as quickly or less quickly than they're presenting needing support. The longer the problem goes on, the more that's going to continue.

What's the solution? It's more affordable housing, and the best way to do that is to make the investments that are necessary. I don't have a number, but based on our back-of-the-envelope calculations as a community around homelessness - those of us who are trying to house the folks who don't have affordable housing - they're knocking at our office door every day saying: You're AHANS, give me somewhere to live. That's many people every day. We would put that number in the billions, not in the millions unfortunately.

BRAEDON CLARK: I certainly agree with you in terms of - as you say, of the number of people who are currently experiencing homelessness in HRM, maybe a quarter need extra support beyond housing. Sometimes I think we fool ourselves and think that we need 10 different steps to get there, but often, as you say, by far the most important thing is housing. I agree with you there. I'm just curious: in the very short term, if you could do something, what do you think would be the most effective, very short-term steps that the government could take to make sure - again, we had a foot of snow 24 hours ago - that people aren't separated from that snow by an inch or two of canvas and they actually have a roof over their heads? What would be the most immediate, practical, effective steps to achieve that?

MICHAEL KABALEN: I think we're seeing some of those investments being made in the temporary solutions that you're talking about. New shelter announcements continue to be made. It's not public in the media, but when bad weather like the snow we saw Sunday and into yesterday comes out, the system has places to put people who need it in an emergency. The challenge is the system isn't necessarily always resourced well enough to grab everybody and get them inside.

There is a responsibility of the individual, the way the system is currently designed, to go to the warming centre, to go to the shelter that's added additional capacity - unless we're going to staff the homelessness support system, so that we can go and bring those

people in or at least try to coerce them to come inside. That's why I always say the solution is housing - because everything else is temporary. Everything else leaves the person vulnerable until they can find adequate, safe, and affordable housing.

[1:30 p.m.]

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

MLA MacDonald.

JOHN A. MACDONALD: One of the biggest concerns I had after I was elected is the amount of deferred maintenance I've heard about over the years. I believe on the buildings it was somewhere close to about \$20 million, roughly, in October 2021. I would like to know from the department how much we spent putting a dent into it since then, and where we are. Those would be my two questions.

THE CHAIR: There's two together. Okay.

Deputy Minister Rafuse.

BYRON RAFUSE: I'm having a good afternoon here. I'm going to defer this to Brian Ward.

THE CHAIR: Mr. Ward.

BRIAN WARD: Public housing - a significant deficit in the assets on the maintenance side. I just have a quick little update here.

In 2023-24, the Housing Agency will roll out approximately 870 projects over 260 public housing buildings. We're spending \$43.7 million on the operating and capital budget, and \$19.8 million of that is just on our operational capital asset management program. We have \$19.1 million in our TCA that was recently announced; \$2.2 million capital asset management program for single-family homes and duplexes; \$1.3 million on interior renewals; and another \$1.3 million on preventive maintenance. We also have \$8.6 million on an accessibility improvement program across the province.

We're focused on preserving and stabilizing existing housing stock. As you may know, the average age of housing stock in Nova Scotia is 42 years old. One of our most recent buildings was built in the 1990s. Our oldest building, which currently doesn't have any tenants, is over 200 years old. We do have housing stock that needs to be replenished, and the new announcement for the 222 units is certainly a step forward on that - the \$80 million.

We're focusing on existing stock with a multi-year capital management plan. We also have plenty coming from the national housing strategy and the bilateral agreement with the federal government. We're building on a 10-year program to identify short- and long-term options and renewal of our public housing portfolio. We are setting our new targets and outcomes. We're improving building systems, reducing energy consumption, and enhancing maintenance and operations in our buildings.

In the next year, we're going to start to work on our preventive maintenance and operational standards. We're focusing right now on our vacancies to ensure that our vacancy rate stays extremely low. We're down around - I believe it's around 2.7 per cent, so we're well below the 3 per cent that we have for our standards. We continue to focus on that. We've created teams in the province where their main role is to do unit turns. We have other teams who go in and do typical maintenance items like toilets, sinks, fixing windows, and that sort of thing.

Under the Canadian infrastructure program, we have 93 projects that are retrofits under way; 39 projects that are about 90 per cent complete; nine projects that are in the 60 per cent or 70 per cent; eight jobs that are just kind of in the 10 per cent to 40 per cent. We have upgrades in 200 public housings in Cape Breton with heat pumps. We have 171 projects completed out of 160 in the 1,911 units impacted under the Canadian investment, so that was between 2019 and 2023.

We have an agreement with EfficiencyOne. There are over 400 energy-efficient projects that we're working on. We've had a cumulative savings of over 8.4 million kilowatt hours. We've reduced our emissions - an average of 136 tonnes of CO₂ annually. We've had an energy reduction translate into over a million dollars saved cumulatively in utility cost.

As you can see, we continue to look at projects that will help us with our efficiency in the portfolio, but we still have 42-year-old buildings out there that we're trying to make efficient. Total rebates - we've claimed pretty close to half a million dollars in rebates.

The accessibility is probably the biggest thing that we've done this year with the 220 units. Eighty of those units will be accessible out of those 222 public units in the four communities we identified. Investments planned in the preservation of existing public housing infrastructure of the 2022-23 fiscal year have nearly doubled those made by previous governments over the last 12 years. Those are pretty much our investments, if that answered your question.

THE CHAIR: There was lots of information in there, so I'm sure your questions were answered somewhere, MLA MacDonald. Thank you, Mr. Ward, for that information.

MLA Sheehy-Richard.

MELISSA SHEEHY-RICHARD: Not to keep you in the hot seat, but I do think you piqued my interest there. I had a different question in mind, but just so I can pick up on that, you mentioned that the vacancy rate is at 2.7 per cent - I think I jotted it right. I can remember first being elected, and I think it was Christmas time, and my biggest thing was people coming and telling me that there's a vacant unit and it's been vacant, and why is that the case. I can actually remember community rallying together to go clean out a home so that we could get people in faster. I think I remember that Minister Lohr himself was working on some units.

The vacancy rate at any point isn't great. We would love to see that they would be at zero, but the reality is there's maintenance, as you just listed in that huge list. Can you tell me a comparison of what the vacancy rate was prior? I think you said it's gotten down to the 2.7 per cent. I'm just curious if you had the number of what it was.

THE CHAIR: Mr. Ward.

BRIAN WARD: I was corrected. Apparently 2.1 is our vacancy rate. It's reduced from 2.3 in October. Sorry, I'm looking at the wrong page. It will take me a minute. Maybe Pam has the answer.

THE CHAIR: Ms. Menchenton.

PAM MENCHENTON: It's currently at 2.1 per cent, but a year ago it was at 4 per cent. It's quite a reduction.

MELISSA SHEEHY-RICHARD: Was it consistently 4 per cent prior to last year, or was it a different number again? Are you seeing in the last couple of years it coming down? What was that rate, for example, when I had people coming in asking why these units were empty?

PAM MENCHENTON: It was hovering between 4 per cent and 5 per cent pretty consistently. We made some pretty dramatic changes when we became an agency. In the last year, we've been able to reduce that to about 2.1 per cent, which is an historic low, actually, for public housing.

THE CHAIR: MLA Hansen.

SUZY HANSEN: My question is to Michael. Yesterday, the town of St. Stephen, New Brunswick declared a state of emergency over their homelessness crisis, calling on the provincial government to provide immediate funding and resources to address the crisis. Do you think similar measures are necessary here in Halifax?

THE CHAIR: Mr. Kabalen.

MICHAEL KABALEN: I don't think calling on a government to make investments is necessary. We've been doing that for years now, I think. What's necessary is additional investment. I think, just to pause, this government has made some of the most significant investments in generations in affordable housing and toward resolving homelessness. The challenge has been after many years of relatively low and no investment. It's almost like we have to play catch-up, and to do so, it needs more investment. That's where we're at.

There are lots of metaphors and similes you can use to that, which I don't like to get into, but we've been doing a lot more than we've been doing, but it's still not having the impact that's needed to turn the crisis in the direction where we're making progress.

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

SUZY HANSEN: No, I'm okay.

THE CHAIR: MLA Duale.

ALI DUALE: My question is to the Executive Director of Client Services - Pam. I'd also like to acknowledge the people who are sitting here today making the testimony for your service. I read some of you. Nova Scotia - this city's a small town. A lot of you do good things and have been in the public service long enough. I really believe you're at the right place. I'm very optimistic that you're going to do the right things.

Having said that, what's in front of us is a challenge that nobody has expected. I met members of the community, talking about the condition we are in, and some of them have been raising this for 20 years and predicting this coming. Unfortunately, nobody paid attention. Here we are today, and we're speaking today.

One of the things that hit my heart today - it was in the news - and is in terms of the client services. We saw in the news, a building that's old enough and people live in there, but have been crying for service and asking for service. These people are clients. They pay rent. They're not different from anyone else, but the way they're treated, they don't feel that way. My question is: What is in place that is measurable, and that people are given the services that they deserve?

THE CHAIR: Is that directed to the department?

ALI DUALE: If I'm not making a mistake, yes.

THE CHAIR: Ms. Menchenton.

PAM MENCHENTON: We're developing right now a new client services strategy that will include some of those measures that you speak about. We've been in place now for about a year. There's a whole lot of things that we're changing, there's a whole lot of

things that we're tightening up and making better. I'm very sorry to say that some of the client services have not been great in the past. Some of it's been terrific, but I don't think we've been consistent in how we've been delivering that. That's something we want to address as we go forward.

As I said, we are developing a new client service strategy and hope to have that in place, hopefully by the Spring. That's something we are developing with measures, as you say. Any time a client or a tenant has an issue or a concern, I hope that they would come to us as their landlord. That's what we do. We're there to help, we're there to address the concerns, fix the faucets, unclog the toilet, and resolve - sometimes there are some tenant issues that we are there to help with as well. If there are community services we can link to - it could be any range of things: mental health concerns, or addiction issues, and so forth. We're there to help link community services to help our clients and our tenants as well.

THE CHAIR: MLA Duale for a follow-up.

ALI DUALE: Actually, I'm pretty great. This is the reason that I raised this question, just to see your title. Quite honestly, in my constituency, I do have the housing district, and most of the phone calls that I get are pertaining to people who are not being given the services that they deserve. Not only that one, even as a human being, being respected.

I'm happy you mentioned this office created, and it's going toward giving the client the services they deserve. Also, most of the people are low income, and some have health issues. We also have a lot of newcomers. I encourage your department, and your office, and your leadership - there should be in place how to serve the people and how to deal with their personal issues. I'm grateful to hear that this is a service that is new, but I'd really like to see in the future an action plan that is actually showing the measurable ideas that will satisfy the people we serve.

THE CHAIR: Our next three questioners will be MLA Leblanc, MLA White, and MLA Clark.

MLA Leblanc.

SUSAN LEBLANC: Hello again. You just talked about how the price tag of really addressing the affordable housing needs is in the billions. I just went to a press conference with the Auditor General this morning where she referenced - I forget the number now - the \$1.7 billion surplus spend of additional appropriations after the budget debate last year.

There is money to spend. We have a big tax windfall, due mostly to the higher population here. We know that we need more affordable housing. We know that there's some money. In your opinion then, what barriers are there to building more non-market housing? If it's not just money, then what do you see as the reason the money's not being

spent, or how it's being spent, or whatever? How can you and other not-for-profit providers be better supported by the government?

[1:45 p.m.]

MICHAEL KABALEN: I just want to finish writing down the second part of the question.

SUSAN LEBLANC: The second part of the question?

MICHAEL KABALEN: There are two questions there, I think. (Laughter)

THE CHAIR: The witness said there are two questions, so this is it. (Laughter)

MICHAEL KABALEN: I think one of the biggest barriers is capital in our community. I know a lot of attention has been placed on the need for public housing. We've got people doing great work in public housing. I think to note, the provincial government is - and will likely be for many years to come - the largest owner, operator, and provider of affordable housing through that system.

I'm not sure I advocate for more of it though. I know that doesn't make me necessarily popular in my community. You've heard about deferred maintenance and you've heard about an operating loss. If you haven't, I'm sure you will. The reason for that is simply because of the age, and because of the lack of meaningful investment that hasn't been made for many years.

We advocate in our community - in the not-for-profit community - that we're the path to creating a scalable, meaningful portfolio of what we call "forever affordable housing." But it requires capital. We don't have the funds in our sector to go out and compete with the largest developers who have almost unlimited access to capital, to go out and buy the best development sites, to go out and acquire a building and convert it to housing. Even the existing programs require us to have some level of equity.

Our perspective is that our careers are equity in this. Many organizations have a professional fundraising arm and can do that, but most don't in our sector. I think the further you get out of the capital region, the more difficult that is. Access to capital so that we could go out and compete with the private sector to acquire the opportunities, to build that forever affordable housing, is one of the biggest barriers.

We're seeing the other barriers come down. Things like the timelines that it's often taken historically for both the provincial and the federal governments to get back to us when we apply to the programs that apply to our sector - those are coming down. But then all the other barriers that we face outside of capital are about scale. Because we have so many relatively small not-for-profit operators, it takes somewhere around 200 to 300 units

that something happens in the organization where they have that professional and organizational capacity to kind of continue to grow and to scale. Below those numbers, you're kind of always playing catch-up. You're not collecting enough overhead. There's a question of scale.

That's not to minimize a lot of the smaller organizations that exist across this province that are trying to do a single development in their community, but when you get to scale, it's a different type of operation, and you can grow.

How can we be better supported by government, I think, is the second part of that question. It's access to that capital. Not necessarily debt, and not necessarily the things that register as debt, like forgivable loans, but that kind of money up front. One of the things we would advocate for is to underwrite our organizations up front and fund us, and then hold us accountable. Underwrite me as an executive director at AHANS, and you can look at my taxes and my credit if you have to. I'll put my own reputation on the line so that we can have access to that capital to go out and compete with the private sector, and build at the scale. If we had capital, we could compete with some of the best developers in our community to make forever affordable housing.

The last point is, I know it would be expensive for government, but the difference is that you're going to pay for it once and then we're going to operate it, financially sustainably, forever. We do that through the grants that we get, but also the way we build. The most recent development under construction through AHANS is completely net zero. It creates more electricity than it needs to operate. That essentially reduces one of the greatest pressures to operating housing, which is your electrical and your heating bill. If you don't have to pay that, all of a sudden we can have predictability for a generation in what our operating costs are going to be, and continue to provide deep affordability for quite a long time.

THE CHAIR: MLA White.

JOHN WHITE: That's a good question to follow up, actually, because it's related to partnering with outside organizations and the general public. It's about the Land for Housing Program use. I'm wondering if you can give us some idea on the criteria for that, and maybe if there are any proposals that have been awarded, and any update on that.

BYRON RAFUSE: I'm going to hand that off to Mr. Mason.

ADRIAN MASON: The Land for Housing Program started last year, so we're still early days. We've been slowly identifying parcels of land across the province that we thought would be suitable for housing development, and making those parcels available to either private developers or community housing organizations. In exchange for the land being used for housing, but most importantly for affordable housing as well, there has to be

an affordable housing component. To date, we have released 28, what we call, property opportunity notices. In fact, I believe there are another four that are due to go out this week.

We've received 20 proposals. We currently have approved 10 projects to move forward. Unfortunately, two of those may not be proceeding any further, but eight are proceeding. They should deliver around 522 new units, as things stand at the moment. That does change in time. These projects are very early stages, so things do change as they move forward. Sometimes they grow in size, sometimes they contract, but at the moment, as things stand, they should deliver about 522 new units. Of that, about 245 will be affordable.

It's been an effective program. It's another tool to help grow and sustain the community housing sector. Of the eight that have been approved to move forward, the majority of them - five of them - are with community housing groups, and three with private developers. We hope that it's a useful tool that's going to help organizations such as the Affordable Housing Association of Nova Scotia build and grow to that scalable critical mass that Mr. Kabalen referred to. Does that answer your question?

JOHN WHITE: It's good information, but I kind of want it out there for the public to see. For a private developer, what commitment is it that you mentioned for the affordable housing option? I know it's a percentage of units. Can you maybe tell us a bit about that, so people know the opportunities out there for them?

ADRIAN MASON: The priority for us, and the priority for any applicant - whether they be a private developer or a community housing group - is that the project is financially viable. There's always a balance between the amount of affordability that can be offered versus the long-term sustainability of the project. Naturally, we're looking for social outcomes, so the higher the affordability or the amount of affordability that's being offered, then the more attractive that proposition would be to us. We also need to know that the project can be delivered realistically. Is it of a scale which is appropriate and likely to happen, and is it going to be sustainable over the long term, over a 20-year-plus term?

Typically speaking, the amount of affordability we'd expect to see in a proposal is anywhere from 25 per cent of the units up to about 50 per cent of the units. It's very rare that we see proposals offering more than 50 per cent of the units being affordable also being financially sustainable. There is a balance point. Occasionally it happens, but rarely. It's typically between 25 and 50 per cent.

THE CHAIR: MLA Clark.

BRAEDON CLARK: I just wanted to ask the department about rent supplements. It was something that you, Deputy Minister Rafuse, mentioned in your opening comments. As we know, the income thresholds were changed from 30 per cent of income to 50 per cent of income, which I believe was a mistake - and we've introduced legislation on that. Just this morning I was meeting with someone who lives in my constituency, which is

majority renters, and she spends 45 to 46 per cent of her income on rent and is not eligible anymore as a result of these changes, which I think is really a shame. I'm wondering if the department is considering changing that threshold back to 30 per cent, which also lines up with the CMHC definition of affordability.

BYRON RAFUSE: I just have a brief comment before I hand it off to Vicki to get into the details on it. We're constantly looking at our programs to see if refinement is necessary or needed to get at the targeted aspect of the program. The rent supplement program parameters were changed. We will continue to look at that. I can't say whether or not we're going to revisit that threshold, but there are other aspects of the program that perhaps need some adjustments to get at the public policy objective of that program. I'll ask Vicki to explain a little bit more as to why we made the change, and the outcome associated with that.

VICKI ELLIOTT-LOPEZ: We changed the threshold to 50 per cent based on the sheer number of applications that were coming through the door, and understanding that our agreement with the CMHC is to target those most in need. When we looked across at other jurisdictions before we made any changes to the program, what we realized was that Nova Scotia actually had one of the most robust, if not the most robust, programs in the country.

Others were very targeted. They were targeted toward those who were working - so no income assistance clients - or those only with disabilities or some other segment of the population. In order to continue to meet those targets of those most in need, we did limit it to 50 per cent. We will continue to make policy changes, as the deputy minister said. As a great example of that, we recently raised the amount of funding and eligibility for seniors from 95 per cent of the MR up to 100 per cent. That means more seniors qualify, and that means more money in their pockets.

We'll continue to do refinements to the program. I think our minister has also said if at some point in the future we have the ability to move that marker in a different direction, then we absolutely will. He's called on our federal government on a number of occasions to increase the amount that they contribute. Currently, we're contributing over \$40 million to their \$10 million, and we would look to the federal government to increase their funding toward the program.

BRAEDON CLARK: Just on the last point that I mentioned in my first question, which was around CMHC definitions of affordability - I know this is something that's come up in the past, but I find it very difficult to assess performance and how we're doing if we don't have a universal definition of what we say is affordable housing. It's very easy to say that term - and I certainly use it all the time - but affordable is what you can afford. That's contextual in some cases, but if we don't know what benchmarks we're working towards, it's hard to measure progress.

CMHC might say it's 30 per cent of your income. Correct me if I'm wrong, but I believe in some of the rent supplement programs, you might be looking at 80 per cent of market rent for the area, which is very different in Dartmouth versus Bedford versus Halifax versus the Eastern Shore. In some places, you're looking at 30 per cent of your income versus 50 per cent. All of these numbers are out there, so it's hard for anyone to really say if we are creating enough affordable housing, if we don't agree on what we mean by affordable housing. I'm wondering: What do we mean by affordable housing - if I could put it as simply as that?

BYRON RAFUSE: I actually think your question answered it, because what is affordable is dependent on the individual and the circumstances they're in. It's very difficult to nail it down to one thing. In fact, if we do limit to one definition of affordability, then that definition won't work in certain programs. If you look at the way we work with developers or community groups to have a certain number of units that are 80 per cent of area market rates, then it gets into difficulty about how one anticipates the expected income of a future tenant. It's really hard to tie those two things together.

We have to use different definitions for different programs to achieve the policy objectives of those programs.

THE CHAIR: MLA Sheehy-Richard.

MELISSA SHEEHY-RICHARD: I just want to go back to the public housing units that you do manage. I wrote 870 and he wrote 860, but somewhere in the vicinity of definitely over 850 are receiving projects in 2023-24. In total, how many public housing units do you manage, and do you have a breakdown of how many are in each district?

THE CHAIR: Mr. Ward. We'll go to our numbers guy.

BRIAN WARD: We have 11,200 public housing. The breakdown of units: in Metro, there are 3,723; in Cape Breton, there are 3,195; in Northern there are 2,104; and in Western, there are 2,148.

THE CHAIR: Is there a follow-up, MLA Sheehy-Richard?

MELISSA SHEEHY-RICHARD: I think it is a follow-up. Of the ones that were announced, have you determined where those will be added? Are they going to be expansions of what we already have in that 11,200, or are they going to be in similar locations? Are they being dispersed as well, or are they in one central location?

BRIAN WARD: The new public housing that was announced, the areas have been identified. I have those here somewhere. There are some here in Halifax, Bridgewater, Wolfville, and in Cape Breton. Those public housing units will be built on existing sites where we have existing buildings.

[2:00 p.m.]

THE CHAIR: MLA Hansen.

SUZY HANSEN: First, I'd like to ask something of the department. It's been talked about policy changes, and I know there's a client services strategy that you're working on. It would be lovely if we were able to have a copy of those policy changes. We know that with our clients, what we have is what we have. If we don't know what those policies are, we can't reinforce some of the things that public housing is looking at to make those changes to.

I'd like that, Chair, if we could get the policy changes from the department so that we can be on the same page.

THE CHAIR: Are you asking one of them to answer that question?

SUZY HANSEN: I'm just asking it of the department - a list of the policy changes to be tabled.

THE CHAIR: I think we can go to the clerk, and ask for that to be sent to the clerk.

SUZY HANSEN: I just wanted to ask that, because I know there are a lot of things that we do as MLAs - that it would help us do this work.

My question will be to the department. Recently, the government removed the ability to provide a statutory declaration in place of a lease when applying for a rent supplement. There are many reasons why people may not have a lease. I'm just wondering: Can you clarify that policy, and how many people have been denied because they don't have a lease since this change was made?

THE CHAIR: I'll look to the deputy minister to direct.

BYRON RAFUSE: I'll direct to Ms. Elliott-Lopez.

THE CHAIR: Ms. Elliott-Lopez.

VICKI ELLIOTT-LOPEZ: What we did was we made it an exception rather than a rule. In the past, anybody could come in and say that they had a lease. We didn't look for proof of that lease. As a result of a review of our program and ensuring that we have measures in place to ensure that those who need the program are getting it, we made it more of an exception than a rule, but we still have that in place, that we will accept.

SUZY HANSEN: Has anyone been denied because they haven't provided a lease?

VICKI ELLIOTT-LOPEZ: I'll have to get back to you on that one.

THE CHAIR: Our next three questioners will be MLA MacDonald, MLA Leblanc, and MLA Ritcey.

MLA MacDonald.

JOHN A. MACDONALD: Michael had a great conversation before we started. I just remember you mentioned the Community Housing Acquisition Program. I'm pretty sure your group received funding for 12 work units. Can you give me an update on that?

THE CHAIR: Mr. Kabalen.

MICHAEL KABALEN: Yes, we use the Community Housing Acquisition Program. It's a unique partnership between the Department of Municipal Affairs and Housing and the Department of Community Services where we can effectively receive 100 per cent of the financing. The Department of Municipal Affairs and Housing does the mortgage, so to speak, and the Department of Community Services covers all the operating costs. We partnered with another agency. We haven't formally announced that partnership, so I'll leave them out of it at this point. They provide the wraparound supports that we've talked about, and then we provide the landlording, so to speak. We maintain the building and we have the leases with the tenants.

We believe that's actually a best practice model where one organization is the landlord, and another organization is there as the support and the advocate for the individual. When those two things come into conflict, everyone plays their role, and the individual doesn't feel left behind by their landlord or by their support.

That's a great program. Unfortunately, it only works for vacant buildings. We wouldn't in good faith displace people to use that partnership to grow our portfolio. We wouldn't want to vacate a building of people who are paying likely more-affordable-than-market rents to then house individuals who are experiencing homelessness, right? What we're looking for is net new when we advocate for more housing and more affordable housing. One of the limitations for that partnership in particular without capital is you need a vacant building to make it work, and you would only in good conscience use a vacant building.

The CHAP is good as well, if you have that capital that I was talking about, because it requires the not-for-profit to have 20 per cent of the purchase price if you don't do that unique partnership with Community Services. That is a barrier for us as an organization that has very limited access to capital right now. We've spent all of our money to buy what we've currently got. We're not a professional fundraising organization where we have this income coming in all the time.

Yes, CHAP is a great program. The barrier is if we want to grow at scale, we can only do so by finding vacant properties at this stage.

JOHN A. MACDONALD: Michael, if you could: What's the status on the 12 units? You missed that portion.

MICHAEL KABALEN: We acquired that building at the end of August. It went through some renovations to take it from its previous use as a purpose-built Airbnb, and we moved the first tenants into that building on the first of December, just this past Friday. All 12 women moved in, and all 12 of those women would be housing-insecure. To tell you any more about that would likely lead you to who the support organization is.

THE CHAIR: MLA Leblanc.

SUSAN LEBLANC: Mr. Kabalen, I have another question for you. A survey conducted this Summer found that 22.5 per cent of those who were sleeping rough reported that they lost their home, or their housing situation, due to a renoviction or a fixed-term lease ending. I'm wondering if you can comment on that. Is that something that you are hearing more widely? What role do you think inadequate protections for renters is playing in this housing and homelessness crisis?

MICHAEL KABALEN: I think the challenge around changing the Residential Tenancies Act so broadly presents other issues. As a not-for-profit provider, for example, we're often dealing with individuals who have been housing-insecure for a long time. We often will start with a fixed-term lease so that we have a conversation at the end of that term to ensure that this is the right and the adequate housing solution for them. To broadly say fixed-term leases are a problem, I think there are lots of good reasons why a fixed-term lease should be used. But you're right - a lot of folks are only using them because it's easier to deal with turning their tenants over, and also getting their rents increased.

I think a more articulate conversation as a society and through legislative process around fixed-term leases is likely required, but to say they're all bad, I think is also an overstep.

Around renovictions, I think there have already been measures by this government put in place to prevent that, and there have been changes. Unfortunately, it does still continue. The most affordable units we can create are the ones that already exist, and we're actually losing at a much quicker pace than we're building or that we're acquiring as a community housing sector. It's certainly retention and prevention of renovictions, or I think instead of stopping renovictions, I talk about empowering our sector to buy those naturally occurring affordable housing properties, and keeping them affordable forever is a better way to go.

The story of how someone falls into homelessness is, as you say - we often assume somebody falls into that. At the start, I talked about the three categories of people in the most high need is about a quarter of the number. You don't start there and then lose your home. More often than not, something has happened - you lose a job, a catastrophe happens in your life, a relationship breaks down, you're fleeing an abusive situation. You were otherwise, what some people would call, living a normal life until that happened to you.

Then you fall into homelessness, and as time goes by, your situation becomes more desperate. Then you begin to acquire things like dependence on some type of substance, or then you acquire mental illness from the trauma that you've been living through, or then you acquire a disability from the harsh conditions you've been living in. More often than not, people fall from a stable situation into homelessness, and then acquire the type of stereotypical things we think that all individuals experiencing homelessness are living through, rather than it's someone developed a dependence on a substance and then falls into homelessness. It's the inverse. You typically experience homelessness first and then you have the problems that we tend to look to people to need those supports to come out of.

That's where I think when you're pointing around renoeviction and losing your housing, that's one of those catastrophes in this market - where there's not a lot of turnover - that we would hope we could prevent.

SUSAN LEBLANC: I think that's a really astute point, which is that we need to prevent those things from happening to cut off the extending trauma and what can happen, as you say, after six months or thereabouts. I also really do take your point about fixed-term leases - I absolutely do. In my world, and the people who come to see me, it's generally people whose landlords are taking to those because they see that is a way to get around the rent cap. I'd love to know your opinion, therefore, on this enforcement branch of residential tenancies, which we've been calling for. We hear it's coming, but it's taking an awful long time. What impact would an enforcement branch have on this whole ecosystem of homelessness?

MICHAEL KABALEN: The landlord-tenant relationship is inherently a power imbalance. The landlord has more power than the tenant. The enforcement branch actually brings the dispute resolution to the place of housing. It helps break a barrier down in one instance. That's one of the biggest reasons we do advocate for it. I think the private landlord organization also advocates for it. In jurisdictions where it exists - where the dispute resolution happens at the place of housing or nearby - we see the disputes resolved much more quickly. We see a lot of the abuse that you were alluding to evaporate in a sense.

Imagine if you had to go to the police station for every problem you had. Now you call the police and they come to you. In a similar fashion that's why I think the advocacy for the enforcement branch exists. In New Brunswick, they have something called the rentals person, I'll call it, but in a sense that role does that. In jurisdictions where it exists, it

works well. Unfortunately, it will have to be backed up with the appropriate legislation to give that branch the tools and the power it needs to resolve those issues. I think that's the delay - the folks at the Department of Justice need the time to give the unit the legislative backing.

[2:15 p.m.]

The Residential Tenancies Act - again, it finds balance. Every time a change is made, eventually it finds balance. Those changes can't be made too quickly, or it can have unintended consequences. I think it's needed. I think as quickly as our colleagues at the Department of Justice can move, we'd be invited to the next legislative session, if possible.

THE CHAIR: MLA Duale.

ALI DUALE: My question is to the deputy minister. I know you've been put in this position not long ago. We know this government has made an intention to double the population of this province. I hate to criticize when good things are being mentioned. As a newcomer, as an immigrant, I'm in favour of immigration issues, but at the same time, I do have concern. Sometimes even I see it in the eyes of the public.

To give you an example, I have a member of my constituency who has in front of her house an encampment. She believes that the reason these people are homeless is because of immigration, and our vision to double the population, and our vision for immigration. That hit my heart, and that's not true. That's not true. But that's a perception that we're creating.

I'm wondering, as your role - what is your relationship with the departments that are making decisions that will have an impact for the housing of this province, and what is in place? What was your role - not of you, but of your department - for these kinds of visions and these kinds of ideas?

BYRON RAFUSE: Unfortunately, I've heard the same stories about immigrants and them being the problem here. Quite frankly, I think that is a short-sighted view of the world.

We recognize - the government recognizes - that immigration is necessary. It's needed. The goal to double the population is not one just as an aspirational goal. It's a goal to help make the province grow. It allows us to provide the services that are needed for the citizenry. If you look at health care - we need immigration to deliver the health care. We need immigration to help build the houses that we need.

It can create a friction point. It's being recognized that it can create a friction point. There is a group of deputy ministers I work with on an ongoing basis. We work with our partners in the Department of Community Services and elsewhere for housing needs in

general, but also the senior-level deputy ministers work on how we plan for growth. It's been recognized that for years that Nova Scotia did not plan for growth. In fact, we planned for a steady state, or maybe even a decline in population. That has shifted, and the thinking has to shift.

The government recognizes that we have to be a little more forward looking in our planning initiatives, but also a little bit more out there in our communications with the citizenry as to why we're doing things. One of those would be the importance of immigration and the importance of welcoming newcomers as the solution, not a problem.

ALI DUALE: What is the vision for your office to make this accommodation and this vision successful? You are the deputy minister of this role, specifically for housing. Would you be able to share with the committee what the plans are that will assure that this will not have an effect within our communities, and to create a situation where people actually will react differently? I'd just like to know what the visions are that are part of your leadership that will make sure that this vision will not have a ripple effect?

BYRON RAFUSE: I think there are probably about three aspects that I can speak to. First of all, part of the action is the housing plan itself. It is an action plan that sets targets for us and for the province to address the housing shortage and the steps that we're willing to take to help incentivize that progress. We need to work on that sphere.

My dual role - this is also the Department of Municipal Affairs and Housing - we work quite closely with our municipal partners not only to address their infrastructure needs, but also to help them work with other partners and with ourselves on welcoming programs for new incomers. They realize that they need to address their needs and their population shortages through immigration, and we're helping them through that regard.

More broadly speaking though, when I talk about the senior levels of government - our deputy ministers who work on systemic issues and how we plan for the future - that would be more messaging or work done from all government departments. That includes the communications when we speak to the citizens of Nova Scotia about why government is doing certain things, why immigration is important, why it's helpful to be welcoming, how to encourage employment activities for newcomers, which allows them to be able to afford the housing that's necessary for those things. That's more what I call a systemic, comprehensive view of the world. That's being led out of the CO or the Deputy Minister's Office.

THE CHAIR: MLA Clark.

BRAEDON CLARK: I just want to make a comment. Deputy Minister Rafuse, you mentioned the need to plan for growth. I think that's absolutely essential. I think you're right that over a couple of decades, when we were dealing with stagnant growth or decline in a lot of places, we got used to that. Turning the switch like that is difficult, for sure. I see

it particularly in my riding, which is growing like gangbusters. That's great, but last week we had an announcement of a special planning area that was approved in my riding - 2,060 units - so 5,000, 6,000 people, let's say - awesome. I am not in any way opposed to that, but there are issues, of course, with planning, transportation, transit, with schools in particular.

Seeing all of those levels of government and departments working together is absolutely essential. Or we get perceptions that population growth is the root cause of our problem, which we all agree is not the case. That's a bit of editorializing on my front there, Chair, but . . .

THE CHAIR: Question.

BRAEDON CLARK: Question, yes, thank you, but I think it's important. You mentioned you have two hats with the Department of Municipal Affairs and Housing. Obviously, municipalities have a key role to play with housing because the Province and the federal government can spend as much money as they want on housing, but in all cases, it's the municipality that decides where housing goes and what's legal where, which is critical.

If we look to other provinces, like B.C. in particular - I think over the last few months B.C. has done some really interesting things on housing as it relates to municipalities. Here, I think we took a bit too much of a heavy-handed approach with HRM. We're clear on that. With B.C., they said: Let's set a deadline a year in advance. These are the provincial zoning minimums that we are going to set across the province of British Columbia. You have to meet these minimums. You can go higher if you want, that's great. You have to meet these minimums by June 2024.

B.C. is doing that, New Zealand has done that, the State of Oregon. Lots of places are starting to move to this front where it makes it easier for municipalities. We have a lot of small municipalities, as we know, that might not have capacity to deal with these issues. If we have a baseline across the board - consistency - I think it will help lead to more housing being built faster, which I know is the government's goal.

I'm just wondering, deputy minister: Are you familiar with that kind of approach in terms of provincial zoning minimums? Is this something the Province is considering? Have you learned anything from what other provinces might be doing on this issue?

BYRON RAFUSE: Certainly, we always take the opportunity to observe what's going on elsewhere to see if there are aspects of what they're doing that would be beneficial to the province here. There are minimum guidelines in the Municipal Government Act as to what a municipality needs to do for its planning purposes. We continue to work with them on that.

There are some capacity issues with some municipalities, from a planning perspective to address the necessary by-laws to put in place for appropriate zoning in their areas. There's also a recognized need on the infrastructure needs side of the house, particularly on wastewater aspects and in transportation, that additional support can be provided. That's why if you've looked over the last couple of years when incremental money was made available to municipalities, it was geared toward addressing some infrastructure needs they may need to address to help their housing needs. Everything will be tied back to their housing needs.

In fact, recent conversations or clarity from the federal government from Infrastructure Canada - they have now taken the lead role on funding that flows to the Province and municipalities on infrastructure or housing needs. It's quite clear their funding will be tied to established infrastructure and transportation plans. If a municipality is not there, they won't be able to tie into the funding, we will help them get there.

THE CHAIR: MLA Sheehy-Richard, MLA White, and then MLA Hansen.

MELISSA SHEEHY-RICHARD: Another thing that I've heard about and hear about is the wait-list. I guess I'm going to be blunt and ask: Are they getting better? Are they getting worse? Where are we on the wait-list?

BYRON RAFUSE: I'm going to assume you mean the wait-list for the Nova Scotia Provincial Housing Agency. As you may have heard, the team is going through that wait-list and reviewing aspects of it - the individuals on there - to see if, first of all, they still require public housing or whether or not their needs for public housing have changed, which would change the aspect of which they're eligible for, those types of things. That is a continuing process.

The wait-list, I don't know if it's changed or not changed. I'm going to ask Pam to comment on that in a second here. It is an evolution as we go through this process to update the individuals on it. As we move people through as quickly as possible from, I'm going to call it, our normal wait-list and then the prioritized list associated with public housing, we are continually trying to address it at the same time as we work through the policy objective and make sure that the right individuals are on the list.

PAM MENCHENTON: Our key goal is to make sure we're getting people off that wait-list as quickly as we can. I'll say that we've been able to shave off 10 weeks on average that wait time, which is something we're working toward every day to make sure we house people as quickly as we can, as I mentioned.

We've increased our turnaround times. When people move out, we want to flip the unit as quickly as we can to make sure that somebody can move in. We've increased that by 21 per cent over this time last year.

We mentioned earlier, too, that the vacancy rate has dropped considerably. Now we're hovering at about 2 per cent, which is an historic low for us. That's really what we're targeting, just trying to get people moved into homes and have roofs over their heads as quickly as possible.

The wait-list is something like - the deputy minister had mentioned that we are looking at that now. We're doing a comprehensive review of the wait-list and checking with folks. It really comes down to individual phone calls to ensure that people are still in need of housing or still eligible for housing. That's a process that we're going through right now.

MELISSA SHEEHY-RICHARD: I do have a quick follow-up, sticking with my theme of the four districts. Can you give me an average wait time in each of the areas? Is one of the areas a longer wait time than another, where we were breaking them down?

PAM MENCHENTON: I don't know if I have that specific data here, but I can tell you that in Metropolitan District, generally, it takes longer, and the Western District, for some reason, takes longer for people to become housed in those areas. I can share those numbers with you after the committee.

THE CHAIR: MLA White.

JOHN WHITE: The last while back, I've been looking at my community, and we happen to have two very large schools that were left vacant for the last couple of years. I've got to say, it frustrated me and a lot of the community because we have people living in the streets with nowhere to go, and we have these buildings which classrooms were moved out of. I taught in one myself, and we come out, and the building was left to the point now where you could drop this inside of the hole in the ceiling. Then you have homes close to it and it's an eyesore for them.

I guess my question is about inherited buildings and how many units that can provide. I don't want to take away from what we're trying to do here. We're trying to create housing first and foremost. Isn't it a double bang for the buck when we rehabilitate a building, remodel a building? Doesn't that help? I mean, it creates more units. I know they're older units, so the maintenance is another issue on that.

I guess my question is: With the inherited buildings, are we able to add many units to the stock?

BYRON RAFUSE: I'm going to open a comment, and then I'll maybe pass it on. Sometimes it's not as easy as you think to convert an inherited building into something that's appropriate for housing, particularly if we're trying to address the needs of the homeless. It does sound great, and it does sound fast, but a lot of these buildings wouldn't be acceptable for individuals living in them. They're not great spaces to provide the

wraparound services that are required for the individuals. It is very difficult, and sometimes it's even more expensive than starting fresh to rehabilitate an existing building, even though it looks great.

[2:30 p.m.]

There may be some circumstances where it does work well. Recently - it wasn't this department - the Department of Community Services rehabilitated an under-used church in Dartmouth for a shelter. That had to go through an extensive period of renovations before they will be allowed to put people in it, even in a shelter circumstance.

It's something that's always looked at, but it's sometimes a lot more difficult than one would believe.

THE CHAIR: MLA White, a follow-up?

JOHN WHITE: Possibly. We actually have a church that's being renovated as well in town. It's going to make 16 units. I guess - if it's a question or not - it seems like the private sector is able to do that much cheaper and much more economically than the government is, to be able to renovate something. I don't know if it's because of union wages or requirements or what. I have a background in construction, and I do realize that you're looking at fire escapes and everything else - windows and water supply to the upstairs as well. In a classroom, for example, you're not looking for water, but to live there you need hot, and wastewater as well. So I do get that the cost is there.

But given that it's eliminating an eyesore in the community for people who already live there and then also providing housing, I just sometimes wonder, is it worth it? I really think that there's a thing to look at there. But you guys know. It's a question, but it's not a question.

THE CHAIR: We'll just let him re-ponder on that.

MLA Hansen.

SUZY HANSEN: I'm going to ask a direct question from Halifax Needham. It's going to be through public housing, so probably you, Pam. We've had a number of clients who have gone through our office in particular, because we know that when they go through the Nova Scotia Provincial Housing Agency, they receive a backlash or they're mistreated or they're dismissed.

We got a message yesterday from one of the managers that said that when they go through our office, there's nothing else that they can do on their end. I said, really? There's nothing that we can advocate for on their behalf? I'd have to go through whoever the direct person is from that area. I thought that was really odd, that I would get from one of the

property managers that when they go through our office - through the MLA office - the property manager no longer deals with that.

This is why I asked about policy. There are a number of things that have changed, and a lot of the things we are unaware of. When it comes down to doing the best work for our clients - they're coming to us because there's clearly an issue. We try our best to work with the department. When we're told, when a client comes to our MLA office, once they're there, there's nothing else that they can do through the property management side, there's an issue. I really feel like I need to be able to address something.

What would you suggest, or what is a process that could happen if a client comes to our office and is asking for help? Is it someone in particular who I have to speak to directly about an issue with housing?

PAM MENCHENTON: You should be able to deal with the Metropolitan District office, for example, in your circumstance, or you could come to me. But that's not a policy. I recognize your role, which is to advocate for your constituents. We advocate for clients and for tenants as well, so it should be more of a partnership approach than anything. That's what I'd like to see going forward.

There are a lot of culture changes that we're trying to make with our organization. As I said, we've been in place now for about a year, and that's something we're working really hard on - changing some old policies and old ways of thinking, and bringing all of that up to date. If there is an issue, I really want to talk to you about that, especially if it's happening over and over again. Can we have it offline? Okay, that would be great. That should not be happening.

SUZY HANSEN: I knew that would be the answer. I just thought it was odd yesterday that I spoke to someone about that. I said, I need to meet with someone. Who do I talk to? Now I'm glad that we're able to have that conversation. We'll do that.

THE CHAIR: Our next questioners will be MLA MacDonald, MLA Leblanc, and MLA Duale, if we have the time. MLA MacDonald.

JOHN A. MACDONALD: Thank you . . . Mr. . . . Chair. That's what happens when you get smart. You made me lose my question. I hope you're happy. (Laughter) There's been discussion around here about the 30 per cent, 50 per cent, what it's supposed to be. What I'd like to know is: I understand we have different zones everywhere, but what is the average rent that's charged? I know it's going to be different for others, so I'm not sure who's going to take that one. What's our high and low? I'd like to know, when it comes to affordable housing, what is our average, what's our lowest, and what's the highest? You don't have to be down to the cent - you can give me a ballpark on that.

I know Ms. Menchenton is looking, smiling, and Ms. Elliott-Lopez is looking, so I may have two answers.

THE CHAIR: We'll begin with Ms. Menchenton.

PAM MENCHENTON: I believe you're speaking about public housing, is that correct? Yes. The average rent is about \$491 a month for one person. Is that what you mean? (Interruption) For a one bedroom, yes. The highest rent goes up to about \$2,000 a month. There are some things we need to bring some consistency to, and we're looking at all of that again. This is really a big part of why we've become an agency - to bring some consistency and uniformity to how we apply our policies and processes right across the province.

We have some legacy portfolios where the rents are different. They were inherited. They were given to us by CMHC, so that's something we'll be looking at in the future to figure how we're going to consolidate all of that - of course not without extensive communication with tenants and consultation. I'll just put that there. I'll let you know too that 30 per cent is what we charge for singles, couples and seniors, 25 per cent for families, and then income assistance has its own scale. They could pay as low as \$175 a month.

THE CHAIR: I apologize. I've been mispronouncing your name the entire afternoon, I believe. It's Ms. Menchenton. Ms. Elliott-Lopez, did you want to address? (Interruption) All right. MLA MacDonald, you're good?

JOHN A. MACDONALD: I'll be nice.

THE CHAIR: MLA Leblanc.

SUSAN LEBLANC: Just like I've always been smart - I didn't just get smart. (Laughs) I want to talk more about the rent supplement program. Generally, with public housing rent, you just mentioned the ratios - 30 per cent, 25 per cent - but with the rent supplement, there are set averages for certain regions. For example, a one-bedroom in Halifax is calculated based on a rent of \$1,032 a month. I'm wondering how often those averages are recalculated. Are we basing those calculations on out-of-date data?

THE CHAIR: Ms. Elliott-Lopez. You just have about a minute and a half to answer the question.

VICKI ELLIOTT-LOPEZ: It's a quick response, actually. They're updated yearly and they're provided to us by CHMC.

SUSAN LEBLANC: I'm just wondering, Ms. Elliott-Lopez, if you can comment on the out-of-date part. Yes, we get them from CMHC, but they get them from somewhere. Where are they getting them or how are they calculating them? The fact is that it's really

hard to find a one-bedroom apartment for \$1,000 in Halifax right now. It seems to me that seems like a strange number to use.

VICKI ELLIOTT-LOPEZ: In conversations with our CMHC colleagues, it's a very complex formula that they use. I believe that they are looking at it, and we are continuing conversations with them. For now, that's what we're provided and that's what we use.

THE CHAIR: MLA Duale, you have the last 15, 20 seconds.

ALI DUALE: My question is for Michael. For me, I come from public service, and I'm actually having this concern. We saw a couple days ago the bridge was closed. There was a fire because of the encampment. In my constituency, there is somebody right now on Highway No. 102 who has a tent. My question is: Do you see in this homelessness any public safety coming from this, if this continues the way it's going? Who will be responsible for this?

THE CHAIR: Who is that addressed to, MLA Duale? Mr. Kabalen, we are up against the clock as far as a lot of the answers that we could provide now. Is there a way you could address that in your closing statement? You have an opportunity to close now.

That concludes our question-and-answer session, so if there's a chance you could address that in your closing statement, you have a couple of minutes to do that.

Mr. Kabalen.

MICHAEL KABALEN: MLA Duale, to answer your question, we have building codes in housing for a reason. That's how we know that you can safely live. Unfortunately, we don't have that for encampments, because it's not meant to be a long-term living solution. So yes, there's an inherent public safety risk. I think even to recognize in HRM, the team that reports on homelessness reports to the public safety unit. Everyone who serves this recognizes that if you are not in stable, safe, secure housing, there's a risk to your own safety and to the public around you, so yes.

Whose responsibility is it? Government represents us. You represent us at all levels. It's your responsibility, because it's our responsibility as a society to take care of those of us who can't take care of themselves.

I think that feeds well into my closing statement. As we talk about the need for affordable housing, as we talk about how we make more happen, I think we often forget that the types of people are not any different from any of us. How many of us or how many of those people we know - and we walk by or have served us our salad at lunch or are in this room today - are in one really terrible situation that they didn't see coming from being someone who needs the type of solutions or living in the type of problems that we talked about today?

I always feel it's important to end on and focus on: these are people who need help. How much is too much to spend when we talk about helping our fellow citizens, recognizing that it could be any of us? As you started today, MLA Hansen - with that unfortunate death in the encampment - how many times does that have to happen until we realize that it doesn't have to? All it takes is investment, and there are lots of good people today who are willing to step up and make use of that investment.

Again, not to criticize or detract from our government, which has made some of the most meaningful investments and some of the most significant spending in generations on this file, but I'd just like to highlight that we need more. On behalf of our community, we need more.

THE CHAIR: Thank you, Mr. Kabalen, for coming today.

Deputy Minister Rafuse, do you have any closing statements?

BYRON RAFUSE: Actually, I have no closing remarks, other than to say thank you to the committee for the questions.

THE CHAIR: Thank you once again to all of you who've come in. You've provided some great information. It's been a great conversation around the table this afternoon.

We are going to take about a three-minute recess to allow for our witnesses to leave the room. Then our committee will reconvene to go over some committee business.

Thank you once again for coming.

[2:43 p.m. The committee recessed.]

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

THE CHAIR: Order. We will reconvene to go over some of our committee business.

The first letter of business is a correspondence received on October 30th, a letter from Kristina King, Director of Governance and Accountability Unit in the Executive Council Office. It was a response to information and a motion passed at our September 5, 2023 meeting. All the members received it yesterday.

Was there any other discussion? I know MLA Duale brought it up earlier, but is there any other discussion on that particular topic?

Seeing no other discussion on that, we'll move on to other correspondence that was received from Deputy Minister Candace Thomas. It was in response to a request for information made at the October 3rd meeting. This was forwarded to all the members of our committee.

Is there anybody who had any discussion about that correspondence that was sent by Deputy Minister Thomas? Seeing none, we'll move on from that.

Is there any other business? MLA Hansen.

SUZY HANSEN: I'd like to put forward a motion to write to the department. We know that the most recent by-name list for HRM shows that there are 1,066 people who are actively homeless in the city, and we know that this number is much greater province-wide. Last week, a father of two died in a Dartmouth tent encampment due to what's been reported as carbon monoxide poisoning from the heater used to keep his tent warm. We heard about that today - about public safety and the safety for others. We've heard today that there's a concern this tragedy will be repeated without immediate and decisive action from this government.

We know that the homeless numbers are rising, and Winter is here. Temperatures are now consistently zero, and yet this government still has not offered a plan to see all of these people housed - not some, but all. This has reached the level of an emergency and needs to be addressed as such.

I move that this committee write a letter to the Premier and members of the Executive Council to urge the government to address this emergency by taking immediate action to safely house all Nova Scotians facing homelessness by: immediately working to open as many shelter and supportive housing beds as there are people sleeping out of doors; creating a housing, communication, and transportation plan to direct people to shelter; and banning Winter evictions to prevent this crisis from worsening.

THE CHAIR: Thank you, MLA Hansen, for that motion. Is there any discussion on the motion? I believe MLA Ritcey wanted a discussion, and MLA Clark after that.

MLA Ritcey.

DAVE RITCEY: As you can tell, we are taking this issue very seriously, and actions are the priority here. We've implemented the five-year housing plan, which was released back in the Fall, in October. It was tabled by the department and released publicly. Other departments partnered within this decision, like the Department of Community Services, announcing the opening of the 24/7 shelter on Windmill Road for people 16 and over and all genders. The shelter currently has 80 beds, and it will be expanding shortly to 100. Work is being done. Our government is taking this very seriously. While we can understand the intention of this motion, we cannot support it.

MLA Clark.

BRAEDON CLARK: I'm disappointed to hear that from the government side. I do just want to say that I agree with the motion. I think, as with all motions, it's not binding. It doesn't mandate that the government spend \$200 million tomorrow. It's simply a goal, and I think a fairly humane and moral goal. Having 1,000 people living outside in our city is a failure of a whole bunch of different actors over a long period of time, but it's a moral failure too - to see people being outdoors, being uncomfortable and in pain, and in the worst-case scenario, dying. That is what happens, unfortunately, when people are put into these circumstances.

I appreciate in particular the part of the motion around communications and transportation because when we have people living outside who may not have a cellphone - may not have any access to information that we take for granted - it's incumbent on government to do that work for these people, so if there is an option for them, they know about it, and they're able to get there. It's not enough just to say, "We have beds." Here's the bed, and let's take you there. Let's make sure you have somewhere to stay tonight.

I think it's an important motion. I think while there is some work under way, there's still going to be hundreds and hundreds of people this Winter who will have nowhere to go. I think that's a real shame, and a very dangerous situation for far too many people.

With that, I will finish.

THE CHAIR: MLA Leblanc.

SUSAN LEBLANC: I have to say, I'm also very disappointed. Listen, St. Paul Parish church is in my riding, and I'm quite happy that shelter is there - relieved. I didn't hear that now it was up to 80 because when it was first announced, it was a 50-bed shelter that could move to 100. Of course, my initial reaction was, well, there are probably 100 people living in tents in Dartmouth North alone, let alone anywhere else in the city.

The fact is that yes, the shelter is important and good, and I'm glad you've mentioned it, but there are 1,068 people in need of shelter tonight - 1,068 - and that shelter has 80 beds. Then we've got a couple of others. We've got Turning Point. We've got the usual shelters, which are always full because they hardly ever change over anymore because people just live there now.

I'm shocked to hear that this committee - you folks aren't speaking for the government. All we're suggesting is that we write a letter to the Premier to say: Take a hard look and make sure that these 1,000 people have a place to sleep before it's too late. Unfortunately, it is too late for some people. People are dying or staying in terribly unsafe situations to avoid being in a tent. Put a pin in that for a second.

I also want to reiterate that it is important to have an emergency plan for those people who won't go to a shelter, for all the reasons we know that people won't go to a shelter. We need to know how they're going to get inside in a weather emergency. Every time we've had a bad weather call - hurricane or a massive snowstorm or whatever - I've gotten like 15 calls from my office asking what we are doing about the people in the tents. It's like, I don't know, what are we doing? So then we call Halifax, the Department of Community Services, or whomever. It's very hard to figure out what the plan is, and it seems like it's a different plan every time.

I think all these things are actually on-the-ground real, important issues. I would love for you to take a sober second thought and change your mind.

THE CHAIR: MLA White.

JOHN WHITE: I'm not a typical member on this committee. I'm a substitute sitting here today. (Interruption) I'm a substitute teacher. (Laughs)

But in all seriousness, there are 1,068 people living homeless in this city. Declaring a state of emergency by the Province, there will still be 1,068 living homeless tomorrow. The fact is that the municipalities have the authority to declare a state of emergency as well. I truly don't think that the Province declaring a state of emergency actually releases any extra money to do anything for it.

We just had a great committee meeting. I believe MLA Hansen asked for a recommendation on declaring a state of emergency, as New Brunswick did. We can go back and check the records, but I'm pretty sure the answer was no, not to do that. That's what I thought I heard, anyway. The answer was to invest. That's what the answer was: to invest in housing. We are a government that has committed to \$1.7 billion in the next five years.

I don't know what a state of emergency is going to do to help that. Look, if I thought it was going to put a roof over people's heads tomorrow, I would absolutely support that motion. I would. But I do not see the sense in declaring a state of emergency when it's not going to address the issue. The reality is that the acts that the government takes - look, as a firefighter, when you're in a leadership role, if you panic, everybody around you panics. (Interruption) No, excuse me. I'm speaking. I want to say this. A state of emergency by the Province, which has no extra funds and no authority with it, is a panic move - when the municipalities have the authority to do this already, if they thought it was better. It doesn't release extra money.

As I said, if I thought it did something, if I thought it released more money, if we could say "state of emergency" and there's a new bank account they can go to, absolutely. I would do that in a minute. I would be there with my tool belt on, and I'd help you build it. But I don't see it as being productive right now. I just don't.

THE CHAIR: Thank you, MLA White. Just to be clear, the motion does not say anything about a “state of emergency.” I wanted to clarify that for the record. I appreciate your comments and your concerns about a few things there.

THE CHAIR: MLA Hansen.

SUZY HANSEN: I’d like to call the question, because we want to make sure that folks understand that we’re writing a letter to the government to consider this, and to make sure that there are as many shelters and supportive housing beds as there are people sleeping outdoors. It’s -5, and -8 tomorrow, -7, -5.

I want to call the question. Can we do that, Chair?

THE CHAIR: I want to make sure that all the members have had an opportunity to speak. All the members of the Opposition have had an opportunity to speak. I think it’s only fair that we allow the government caucus to have an opportunity to share their views.

SUZY HANSEN: Fair enough.

THE CHAIR: MLA Sheehy-Richard.

MELISSA SHEEHY-RICHARD: I just sat before a committee and listened to AHANS talk specifically about the fact that our government has done more than has been done in decades. I think it’s evidenced by my comments MLA Ritcey . . .

THE CHAIR: Order. Sorry, that concludes our meeting for this afternoon. Our next meeting will be January 11, 2024, from 1:00 p.m. to 3:00 p.m. This committee had agreed to hold this meeting on this date because the first week of the month was going to be during the holidays. The witnesses will be from the Department of Labour, Skills and Immigration re Modernization, Accessibility and Harmonization of Safety Regulation and Services for Today’s Workforce.

That concludes our meeting. Meeting is adjourned.

[The committee adjourned at 3:00 p.m.]