

HANSARD

NOVA SCOTIA HOUSE OF ASSEMBLY

STANDING COMMITTEE

ON

HUMAN RESOURCES

Thursday, January 11, 2024

Committee Room

**Modernization, Accessibility and Harmonization of Safety Regulation
and Services for Today's Workforce
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

[Ali Duale was replaced by Hon. Tony Ince.]
[Kendra Coombes was replaced by Lisa Lachance.]

In Attendance:

Kilian Schlemmer
Legislative Counsel

Judy Kavanagh
Legislative Committee Clerk

WITNESSES

Department of Labour, Skills and Immigration

Ava Czapalay, Deputy Minister
Scott Nauss, Senior Executive Director of Safety
Jeff Dolan, Executive Director, Technical Safety



HALIFAX, THURSDAY, JANUARY 11, 2024

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. My name is Chris Palmer, MLA for Kings West and the Chair of the committee. Today, in addition to reviewing appointments to agencies, boards, and commissions, we'll hear from the Department of Labour, Skills and Immigration regarding Modernization, Accessibility and Harmonization of Safety Regulation and Services for Today's Workforce.

At this point, I'd like to ask everybody to put their phones on silent. I'd also like to ask all of our committee members, beginning with our Vice Chair, MLA Sheehy-Richard, to please introduce yourselves by stating your name and your constituency.

[The committee members introduced themselves.]

THE CHAIR: For the purposes of Hansard, I'd also like to recognize the presence of Legislative Committee Clerk Judy Kavanagh to my right, and please give a big welcome to our Legislative Counsel for today, Kilian Schlemmer. Welcome, Kilian - big shoes to fill.

Good afternoon, everybody. Welcome. I look forward to our conversation today. As we do with every HR Committee meeting, we will begin with agencies, boards, and commissions appointments, and then we'll do our other committee business after our witnesses have left the room today. We will look to MLA Sheehy-Richard.

MELISSA SHEEHY-RICHARD: For the Department of Communities, Culture, Tourism and Heritage, I move that Jan Raska be appointed Member, Public at Large to the Advisory Board of the Public Archives.

THE CHAIR: Motion on the table. Is there any discussion?

All those in favour? Contrary minded? Thank you.

The motion is carried.

MLA Sheehy-Richard.

MELISSA SHEEHY-RICHARD: For the Department of Communities, Culture, Tourism and Heritage, I move that Aubrey Reynolds "Rennie" Beaver and Don Wescott be appointed as Members to the Sherbrooke Restoration Commission.

THE CHAIR: Motion on the table. Is there any discussion?

All those in favour? Contrary minded? Thank you.

The motion is carried.

MLA Sheehy-Richard.

MELISSA SHEEHY-RICHARD: For the Department of Health and Wellness, I move that Maria Lasheras be appointed as Member of the Board of the College of Occupational Therapists of Nova Scotia.

THE CHAIR: Motion on the table. Is there any discussion?

All those in favour? Contrary minded? Thank you.

The motion is carried.

MLA Sheehy-Richard.

MELISSA SHEEHY-RICHARD: For the Department of Health and Wellness, I move that Dr. Sachin Seth and Dr. Sunita Sharma be appointed Members, Dental

Association, and Michelle Fowler be appointed as Member, Assistants Association to the Provincial Dental Board of Nova Scotia,

THE CHAIR: Motion on the table. Is there any discussion?

All those in favour? Contrary minded? Thank you.

The motion is carried.

MLA Sheehy-Richard.

MELISSA SHEEHY-RICHARD: For the Department of Public Works, I move that Ted Farquhar be appointed as Member to the Halifax-Dartmouth Bridge Commission.

THE CHAIR: Motion on the table. Is there any discussion?

All those in favour? Contrary minded? Thank you.

The motion is carried.

That concludes our agencies, boards, and commissions appointments. We will go right into our topic for this afternoon. Again, welcome, everyone. Our topic is Modernization, Accessibility and Harmonization of Safety Regulation and Services for Today's Workforce. We'd like to welcome all of you who have come today. I'd like to give everybody an opportunity to introduce themselves, and then we'll get into opening statements after that. We'll begin with Mr. Dolan on my left.

[The witnesses introduced themselves.]

THE CHAIR: I'm not sure who has opening statements, but I will give it to the deputy minister. Ms. Czapalay.

AVA CZAPALAY: Thank you for inviting the department here today to discuss this important topic. I want to take some time today to highlight some of the work the department is currently engaged in around modernizing and harmonizing workplace safety. We're trying something new where we're projecting the remarks as well as slides. You can let us know if you feel that's an enhancement or not to the remarks.

LSI is committed to providing effective safety regulations that protect the health and safety of all Nova Scotians, promote social and economic well-being, and foster economic growth and innovation. LSI accomplishes this by maintaining meaningful and current regulations and standards, building effective partnerships, offering impactful safety-related services, and being active at federal, provincial, and territorial tables to learn and share best practices.

The Safety Branch within LSI concentrates its efforts on safe and healthy workplaces, work practices, and safety standards for regulated equipment to protect the general public. The Occupational Health and Safety Division concentrates its efforts on promoting safe and healthy workplaces, safe work practices, and safe standards that protect people at work. It does this by relying on the internal responsibility system, which acknowledges the shared responsibility of employers and employees for workplace health and safety. The Technical Safety division works with industry, municipalities, businesses, and the public to safely regulate amusement devices, elevating devices, boiler systems and plants, electrical work, cranes, and fuel safety. They use a range of compliance tools including certification, registration, licensing, permitting, and inspections.

LSI is collaborating with other departments to minimize regulatory and administrative burden for skilled tradespeople wishing to live and work in Nova Scotia. We have regular interdepartmental conversations to ensure that tradespeople coming to Nova Scotia from another province or territory can obtain their licence or credential quickly and efficiently.

This past June, premiers and ministers from Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, P.E.I., and Newfoundland and Labrador signed the Agreement to Improve Technical Safety, Interjurisdictional Commerce, and the Mobility of Certified Tradespeople in Atlantic Canada, where they agreed to reconcile regulatory measures that act as barriers to trade, investment, or labour mobility within Canada. In June 2022, Nova Scotia updated workplace first-aid requirements, fulfilling a commitment to harmonize its rules with other jurisdictions in Canada. These changes will reduce the overall cost for employees and businesses by about \$1.5 million annually and reduces regulatory burden. Future work in harmonization will include harmonizing fall protection and Workplace Hazardous Materials Information System, known as WHMIS.

LSI's Technical Safety division plays an important role in supporting the Province's Climate Change Plan for Clean Growth and the Green Hydrogen Action Plan. As an example, since 2022, LSI Technical Safety has been working with Eastward Energy, formerly Heritage Gas, on the utility's plan to blend hydrogen into its existing natural gas network for HRM in 2026.

The Technical Safety team also works closely with the Department of Natural Resources and Renewables, and the Department of Environment and Climate Change, as well as the Nova Scotia Utility and Review Board. LSI works with these other departments on the safe and reliable production, delivery, and consumption of hydrogen and other green energy sources.

In Nova Scotia, electrical permitting and inspection services are conducted by Nova Scotia Power with the approval of the Provincial Chief Electrical Inspector, who is a member of the Safety Branch. LSI's Technical Safety division is working with Nova Scotia Power to implement risk-informed processes for all customers that will further reduce wait

times and increase efficiency without impacting safety. Currently, Nova Scotia Power visually inspects 100 per cent of the mechanical installations in the province, which is time and resource intensive. LSI is working with Nova Scotia Power to pilot and implement risk-based inspection programs and remote digital inspections that will be more efficient while maintaining safety standards.

Energy storage solutions are a key component of Nova Scotia's renewable energy strategy, allowing excess wind and solar energy to be used during peak demand hours, and reducing renewable energy waste. LSI's role is to ensure that products and systems are manufactured and installed in accordance with the Canadian Electrical Code.

The Safety Branch is leading the first review of the workers' compensation system in Nova Scotia since 2002. In Spring 2023, the Minister of Labour, Skills and Immigration announced a review committee chaired by Doug Reid. The committee consists of both employer and employee representatives, and will provide advice on necessary actions and the prioritization of those actions.

As part of this review, the minister announced public consultations to obtain input on the workers' compensation system. These consultations took place in 10 towns and cities across Nova Scotia, and 13 sessions were held virtually. A total of 194 Nova Scotians attended, 495 surveys have been completed through the website, and 40 presentations have been submitted. A full report on the consultation will be presented to the minister this Spring, and the final report on the review of the workers' compensation system is due in late Spring.

All workers deserve to feel safe and welcomed every day at work. Workplaces should be welcoming, free of harassment, and supportive of overall well-being. This Fall, we also conducted a public consultation across Nova Scotia to hear about experiences with workplace harassment. This feedback will help inform work to create safe, fair, and healthy workplaces for Nova Scotians that are free from harassment. These consultations also took place in November in 10 towns and cities across Nova Scotia, and 13 sessions were held virtually. For this particular consultation, 214 Nova Scotians attended in person or virtually, and 380 surveys were completed through the website. A report on this consultation will also be presented to the minister in the Spring.

During the last sitting of the Legislature in the Fall, government passed a bill that amends the Workers' Compensation Act to allow gradual onset stress to be a compensable injury. Gradual onset stress is defined as persistent, ongoing stress that has impacted someone's health so much that they cannot perform their current work duties. We had heard from both employers and workers that we needed to do more to protect the mental health of the workforce, and this is a good first step. Psychological injuries need to be recognized in the same way that we recognize physical injuries. The Workers' Compensation Board of Nova Scotia is currently consulting and developing policies and operations that will allow them to implement gradual onset stress by the September 1st deadline.

We know that young workers and newcomers to Nova Scotia face an increased risk of workplace injury. To address this, the department is focused on ensuring newcomers and youth are provided with the information that they need about their roles and responsibilities when it comes to safety in the workplace. A few examples of this work include that we now have safety materials available in nine languages. We also have interpretation services available to safety staff in the field, and an online training module focused on educating new workers on workplace safety has been created in partnership with the Nova Scotia Federation of Labour.

Part of modernizing safety is to get information to individuals where they are consuming it. That's why we launched the new Nova SAFE app earlier this year; it is safety information made simple. Nova SAFE provides plain language explanations of workplace and technical safety topics that make it easier to comply with rules and regulations all from smartphones and tablets. To date, we have had more than 20,000 users and 50,000 sessions. The app will continue to be updated based on feedback from our safety officers' experiences in the field and from the general public.

Thank you for your time today. I look forward to the conversation, and we're happy to answer any questions.

THE CHAIR: Thank you, deputy minister. As per the method of our committee, it's a show of hands. We go around the table. We'll do questioning until 2:45 p.m., and then I'll give you an opportunity to give any closing statements at that point in time.

I would like to ask all of our witnesses to remember to wait until I recognize you and the red light comes on before you speak, but we look forward to the conversation, like I said. We'll open it up to questions now. We'll begin with MLA Ince.

HON. TONY INCE: Thank you, and good afternoon. My question is: Is the department making training for skilled trades more accessible, like through high schools and so on?

AVA CZAPALAY: Ensuring that workers have training is a very important piece of the work that we do through the Nova Scotia Apprenticeship Agency and through our Skills and Learning Branch. There are two ways that skilled trades workers enter the workforce. One is through direct entry where they're hired, and their employer trains them through oversight and experience on the job through the apprenticeship pathway, but also for youth in high school and maybe at NSCC, for example, who may not have decided exactly on what trade they want to pursue. There is a great opportunity to provide some workplace training, some introductory courses on their role in being safe at work, and just ensuring that they understand what their responsibilities are. Those courses are in place through NSCC.

We also, through the minister's pre-apprenticeship panel last Spring, identified some ways where we can incorporate more trades training opportunities with youth in the secondary system.

[1:15 p.m.]

THE CHAIR: I will just remind all of our members that I will allow for a brief follow-up if it's pertaining to your original question. It's not an opportunity - just a reminder - to launch into another line of questioning, but I will allow for a quick follow-up in the case that you need one. We'll go to MLA Lachance.

LISA LACHANCE: I wanted to ask about the workplace harassment consultations that you held earlier this year. I'm wondering if you could elaborate on what types of harassment were considered, and whether identity and systemic oppression issues were considered in terms of racism, classism, homophobia, transphobia, that sort of thing.

AVA CZAPALAY: First and foremost, we want to say that all employees deserve a safe workplace. That's the fundamental guiding principle behind all our work. We'll endeavour to work with employers and employees to make sure that happens. With the workplace harassment and bullying consultation that happened in the Fall - and I provided you with the numbers - we really didn't set any expectations or parameters around what we were going to hear. We wanted to hear from everybody about their experiences. We heard from both employees and employers.

What we heard from employers is that they need clarity, they need assistance, they need more tools in order to implement safe workplaces effectively. Then we heard a full range from employees coming forward. I haven't seen the draft report yet. That will take some time to compile, but we really didn't put any parameters around who could attend. We just opened it up to all Nova Scotians to come forward and share. I'm very pleased with the numbers of people who did come forward and share very openly with our team.

LISA LACHANCE: Once you review the report from that, is there an intention to make sure that any gaps are filled?

AVA CZAPALAY: I think I'll defer that question to Scott Nauss as Senior Executive Director of Safety.

THE CHAIR: Mr. Nauss.

SCOTT NAUSS: I can say that after the report has been issued, a full review will be done by our staff to determine if there are any gaps in information that was mentioned or relayed during the engagement sessions but was not captured.

THE CHAIR: MLA Young.

NOLAN YOUNG: You mentioned about labour mobility and some updates on that. I wonder if you could speak a bit more on some of the work being done.

THE CHAIR: Mr. Dolan.

JEFF DOLAN: With respect to labour mobility in the skilled trades, we are working with the Nova Scotia Apprenticeship Agency and a number of departments across government, first ensuring that we are in full compliance and actually exceeding the requirements of the Canadian Free Trade Agreement by making sure there is harmonization and equity from a training and certification standpoint, which would improve labour mobility.

Also, we're currently assessing the landscape to ensure that there aren't any redundancies that exist. If there is a certification that's valid or a licence that's valid in another province, and that worker is in good standing, we're assessing the current need as to whether Nova Scotia needs to be reciprocating that licensing once someone arrives here, and whether or not a fee should be associated with that - not so much from a regulatory burden standpoint, but more from an administrative burden standpoint. Technology has advanced to the point where we're confident that information can be shared across jurisdictions where historically that had been a challenge. We're making sure that there can be a seamless approach not unlike a driver's licence, and we want to incorporate that.

THE CHAIR: MLA Young, any follow-up?

NOLAN YOUNG: Just a quick one. Could you give me a concrete example of something that . . .

JEFF DOLAN: Good examples that exist for us right now, or opportunities that exist for us right now - provided that the province of origin actually does issue a licence - an example would be a gas fitter or a gas technician. If they're certified and licensed in their province and in good standing, we see no reason why that tradesperson should not be able to travel here and work without, for lack of better description, checking in with government.

There are situations - for example, in the crane operator industry - where their province of origin may not license that individual. If they don't issue a licence, we're not in a position to issue a licence based on experience and skill alone.

Provided that exists in the province of origin, we're in a good position to do so. Other industries would be elevator mechanics; like I said, gas fitters; boiler and pressure equipment. The good news there is that they're all critical positions that could address the housing shortage with the population growth in Nova Scotia.

THE CHAIR: MLA Mombourquette.

HON. DEREK MOMBOURQUETTE: Good to see you all. My first question is actually about something that you've probably heard in the media. You talk about workplace safety. I'm talking about our constituency offices. They're all government employees. They work predominantly by themselves, and predominantly women. We've seen a number of violent incidents, and we've seen a number of issues arise, whether it happened in an MLA office here in Halifax - many of us probably have stories of individuals who have come in.

I think it's something that needs to be talked about. For all the constituency assistants who are front-facing every day, who are distributing and providing many of the programs that your department and other departments offer, I'd like some feedback on what your thoughts are around staffing components within those offices, and what we could do to help support the amazing work that they do. As I said, very front-facing, and this is becoming a big problem. It's a challenge for people.

THE CHAIR: Deputy Minister Czapalay.

AVA CZAPALAY: I certainly did hear the report on CBC Radio this morning. First, my heart went out to the individual. Second, first thing this morning, we did meet with Minister Balsler to talk about this. I'd like Scott Nauss to share some details on what exists now and the types of conversations we had this morning.

THE CHAIR: Mr. Nauss.

SCOTT NAUSS: All employees have the right to a safe workplace. It's clearly laid out in the Occupational Health and Safety Act. One of the regulations that supports the Occupational Health and Safety Act is the Violence in the Workplace Regulations. I think they would definitely apply in this situation.

The Violence in the Workplace Regulations speak to the need for the employer and employees to do a survey - a potential-for-violence survey of the workplace. It asks many questions about accessibility of law enforcement, previous violent incidents, that sort of thing - the number of people working at the site. Once that assessment is complete, it can guide you toward some potential solutions. That can include additional staffing. It can include panic alarms, barriers, that sort of thing.

These services are available on our website. We encourage any employer whom the Violence in the Workplace Regulations apply to, or anyone who's experienced a violent incident, to please complete this survey and put those measures in place.

DEREK MOMBOURQUETTE: I appreciate your expertise on that, from the department and yourselves. It's a case where, as I said, these employees are working by themselves. They're very front-facing. Different from other departments within government, they're working with elected representatives who are very out-there in

communities. Lots of wonderful people come into our offices looking for programs. We've obviously had a great relationship with your department and others to make sure we can distribute the work, but now we're into an aggressive environment at times.

I hope that, and I guess my question is - and you kind of alluded to it - that through that survey, there could be recommendations from the government that say additional staff could be needed in those offices, based on the feedback that you receive.

SCOTT NAUSS: Yes. The only thing that I would add is that these surveys need to be completed on a case-by-case basis and a site-by-site basis. Some offices are higher-risk than others. It's not a one-size-fits-all approach. But I do appreciate that. Please seek out our website. All of the information is there. If you have any questions, please contact our safety line, and our departmental staff will be happy to help.

THE CHAIR: Our next round of questioning will be from MLA Ritcey, MLA Sheehy-Richard, and MLA Lachance.

MLA Ritcey.

DAVE RITCEY: You touched on it in your opening remarks. Just wondering if you can elaborate on how modernization within the Safety Branch supports the Province's Climate Change Plan for Clean Growth and the Green Hydrogen Action Plan. I will have a follow-up.

JEFF DOLAN: It's well-known that Nova Scotia, because of its location and weather, is well positioned when it comes to green energy. As part of the legislation released with respect to climate action and green energy, and the two action plans that were submitted subsequently, we're working with departments across government - Natural Resources and Renewables, Environment and Climate Change, and others - to ensure that we're well positioned to be able to implement renewable energy wherever possible. Wind and solar are the current focuses, at least for our department, given the fact that they are domestic and they're onshore. They fall under our regulatory authority.

With respect to green hydrogen, we've been working with Eastward Energy, formerly known as Heritage Gas, for quite some time. Eastward Energy approached us some time ago with their plan - their intention to begin blending hydrogen or green hydrogen into their existing natural gas supply. In discussions with the Department of Natural Resources and Renewables, and the Nova Scotia Utility and Review Board, it was identified that Eastward's system, given its relatively young age from an infrastructure standpoint, was well positioned and able to produce and transport hydrogen blended into the natural gas supply reliably and safely.

What we're focusing on right now is making sure that because there is an existing natural gas network with existing products and appliances on that network that are

consuming pure natural gas - for lack of a better description at this point in time - we want to make sure that all of the certifications that were issued for those appliances will stand once hydrogen is blended into that.

We're working with Eastward Energy, Dalhousie University, and some of the national certification bodies. CSA Group and Underwriters Laboratories have come out and publicly stated that hydrogen blended up to 5 per cent - any certification of natural gas appliance will stand, and will still be considered natural gas. So there will be no certification issues there. We're working with Eastward Energy to pilot their plan and make sure that all devices on that system are going to be - certifications will remain in place once the gas is blended in.

We also want to make sure that we're part of the longer-term plan from a standards and regulations standpoint like other provinces, and like other places in the world. The plan is to safely exceed 5 per cent when it's safe and reliable to do so.

THE CHAIR: MLA Ritcey, you mentioned you have a follow-up?

DAVE RITCEY: No, he answered it. It's all good.

THE CHAIR: MLA Sheehy-Richard.

MELISSA SHEEHY-RICHARD: There are so many good tidbits of information in that one slide. I wish I had a printed copy so that I could refer to that. What piqued my interest was on the harmonization agreements that have been signed in areas that you mentioned for first aid training kits. With future harmonization planned for mobile equipment and occupational exposure limits, I was wondering if you could just give the committee maybe a vague idea of when to expect the OELs to be added into that.

SCOTT NAUSS: I can say that we currently adopt the ACGIH standard. There is a robust standard in place right now. Really, before we adopt the OEL standard, we need to do a cross-jurisdictional scan to make sure that all jurisdictions are able to measure and meet these standards. We know particularly, for instance, silica - a lot of jurisdictions are having problems being able to meet the current OEL standard. With that in mind, we want to make sure that prior to adopting, all jurisdictions across the country are able to meet and measure the standard effectively, and it does not put employers in an undue situation where they can't meet a standard.

THE CHAIR: MLA Sheehy-Richard, follow-up?

MELISSA SHEEHY-RICHARD: That work has already . . .

THE CHAIR: Mr. Nauss, would you like to answer that?

[1:30 p.m.]

SCOTT NAUSS: I would just say that that work is ongoing. We currently follow the ACGIH standard, which we feel is adequate, and a robust system protecting employees.

THE CHAIR: MLA Lachance.

LISA LACHANCE: I think that as we try to build a workforce that's safe for everyone - and as our workplace becomes more diverse and there are more ways of supporting employees - I'm wondering how your department is responding and perhaps building capacity or developing programs that address issues of racism, homophobia, transphobia, or discrimination based on immigration status. What is the department doing to address those issues?

THE CHAIR: Deputy Minister Czapalay.

AVA CZAPALAY: Everyone here is probably getting the sense about how diverse our department is in terms of its reach. We have our Safety Branch, but we also have Labour Standards. I'll talk about those two, and then I'll ask Scott if I've left anything out.

It's our hope and desire that our workplaces do become more diverse. We're seeing that every day. We're seeing that also throughout Nova Scotia. It's not just an urban phenomenon. Our efforts through our immigration and population growth are to, as you know, grow population in rural Nova Scotia. In everything, we lead with education, awareness, and training. It has to be a collective effort in terms of ensuring that Nova Scotia workplaces are welcoming in every sense of the word, and that people feel safe at work, both from a psychological and mental health perspective, and also from a physical perspective.

We do have an internal responsibility system ingrained in our philosophy in the Safety Branch, which calls upon all those involved to take a role in safety at work. By that, we mean the employer, the employee, and also the Province, ensuring through mechanisms like our Nova SAFE app and through our staff doing outreach, but also through our Labour Standards Branch where people can call in and report something anonymously in terms of a labour situation. We also have a 1-800 number in our Safety Branch where people can report in. We're both proactive and reactive in responding to safety in the workplace. It is truly a priority of ours, and with everybody's help, we'll make sure that Nova Scotia workplaces are safe and welcoming.

LISA LACHANCE: What actions have been taken internally in the department to build the capacity of your staff to respond to these issues?

THE CHAIR: Mr. Nauss.

SCOTT NAUSS: I'd like to highlight a few key things we've done to better connect with equity-seeking employees. First off, we do have a few designated positions, particularly on the outreach side, who are designated folks in the hope that they can connect with diverse communities. Staff have baseline diversity training. We have an effective partnership with ISANS, which has led us to offering translation services in nine languages for a lot of our print materials. Our web-based app meets the latest accessibility standard, which enables us to connect better with folks who are visually or hearing-impaired.

Beyond that, we're hoping to expand our app to include additional languages - again, based on the guidance of ISANS and what they're seeing the makeup of our new Nova Scotians who are joining the workforce.

THE CHAIR: MLA Young, MLA Hansen, and then MLA Mombourquette.

NOLAN YOUNG: In your opening remarks, you talked a little bit about updating the workers' compensation review. I wonder if you can give us a little bit more detail, maybe with the focus of the review or anything pertinent?

THE CHAIR: Deputy Minister Czapalay.

AVA CZAPALAY: The team is very excited to have the review in place. The last time the workers' compensation system was reviewed in Nova Scotia was in 2002, so it's been a while. Partly in response to the changing workforce, but also the fact that it's been 20 years since the system was reviewed, the minister decided it was time to conduct a review. We do have a formal review under way. The first meeting took place in July. The review committee consists of both employers and employee groups, and is chaired by an independent chair, Doug Reid, who's well-known in Nova Scotia.

We've asked the review committee to look at all aspects of the Workers' Compensation system. If you wanted to think about themes, they'd be looking at the system from a services and efficiency point of view. Is the system working? Are there any improvements to the efficiency of the system? Second, what are the benefits that Nova Scotia workers receive through that system, and how do they compare to other jurisdictions? Also, what are employers getting for their investment in the system?

The committee is having very frank and open discussions. I mentioned in my opening remarks that the committee's discussions are supplemented by a review. We had a public consultation in November, and we heard from Nova Scotians - both employees and employers - on the system. That feedback will play into their consideration as well. Toward late Spring, early Summer, we hope to have a report for the minister on the findings of the review committee.

THE CHAIR: MLA Hansen.

SUZY HANSEN: The minister stated that there were 24 workplace fatalities last year. I'm curious to know: Are the maximum fines sufficient enough deterrents? As well, are there any other types of enforcement or other prevention methods in place so that we can continue to prevent those types of fatalities in the workplace?

THE CHAIR: Mr. Nauss.

SCOTT NAUSS: You are right that one workplace fatality is one too many. We strive to eliminate workplace fatalities and serious injuries through our work. We approach our work through our Pathways to Compliance, which really categorizes our work into four categories, the first being setting effective regulations. We are always analyzing our regulations and making sure that they reflect the current needs of our current workforce.

We want to make sure that these requirements are well-known throughout all workplaces. We focus a lot of efforts on promotion, whether it be through our app, through our promotional materials, through site visits from our awareness and outreach staff. We really strive to get the information out there, because prevention is key when it comes to these serious incidents.

We have a team of inspectors distributed throughout the province who each day are out doing workplace site visits and inspections. They are looking to make sure that there's compliance, and in situations where they find non-compliance, they point it out to the employer and take appropriate action. Depending upon the severity of the infraction, enforcement action could be taken, or if that employer has a repeated pattern of non-compliance, again, an appropriate enforcement action could be taken. This could be everything from a compliance order, which is a legally binding requirement to address an issue, to an administrative penalty, which is a penalty system outside of the court system, all the way to a long-form prosecution, which you often see in the cases of workplace fatalities.

SUZY HANSEN: Are the numbers from the previous year any different from the years before, or are they lower or higher than before?

SCOTT NAUSS: I would categorize the numbers as being stable. We're a fairly small jurisdiction, and we divide fatalities into acute, which is a single incident - the best example would be a workplace fall or the drowning of a fisherperson - and then chronic fatalities, which are long-term exposure, often to chemicals, or a medical event that happens in the workplace. When we split those apart, the bulk of the workplace fatalities are on the chronic side. I would say that they are stable, and we strive to lower them.

THE CHAIR: MLA Mombourquette.

HON. DEREK MOMBOURQUETTE: My question is around some legislation that was passed in the last session. It's one of the key bullets of the *Roadmap to 2027*, enhancing

WCB coverage. Our caucus has been advocating for its expansion of serious illness job protection so that it mirrors the 26 weeks the federal government now allows for employment insurance benefits.

As we all know, in the Legislature, all three parties have endorsed the idea of doing this, and the direction was given to the minister to go back and formulate, ultimately, what the legislation would look like. My question is: Can you provide the committee an update?

AVA CZAPALAY: We were just speaking about this yesterday with the minister. An update will be coming through the minister, but I don't have one for you today. It's work that's ongoing, and it's also work that involves looking at what other jurisdictions are doing, as well as the federal government.

DEREK MOMBOURQUETTE: You can't give me a specific date - and I appreciate that because you're doing your work, but do you anticipate within this year that you'll be able to come back - as I said, this is something that's been endorsed by all three parties to be completed. Can you give any kind of rough timeline on what you feel will be necessary to get it done?

AVA CZAPALAY: I certainly think that it's an important piece of work for Minister Balsler as well. The team will be working to provide her with the best possible information so that she can decide when to bring it forward, and how to bring it forward.

THE CHAIR: Our next round of questioning will be from MLA Ince, MLA Ritcey, and MLA Sheehy-Richard.

TONY INCE: My question is more around workplace safety and making sure that everyone has a safe workplace. Can you enlighten me or give me an idea of how you work with the Department of Health and Wellness in terms of - let me give you an example. I've recently received a number of phone calls from medical students who are moving on the path to become doctors. They have discussed with me challenges that they've had in the workplace. Once they're out of that role and become actual doctors and everything else, what is the role with you and the Department of Health and Wellness to ensure that these folks have a healthy, safe workplace?

SCOTT NAUSS: The department has really focused on the health care sector. They have some of the highest injury rates across all sectors, so it's definitely one that's on our radar. We've been working very closely with the department. The department launched a workplace safety strategy, which we participated in. We do have some ongoing work in the long-term care sector, particularly with the VON where we are supporting them in a workplace safety strategy that they're developing. We offer site visits and inspections. We have done a lot of promotional work, and we've done a lot of work working with joint occupational health and safety committees to help foster the development of that team so they can proliferate across their work teams.

[1:45 p.m.]

TONY INCE: I'm aware of those, and thank you for the great work that you're doing in that area. My concern after talking to a number of these medical students is more around their concerns of cultural competencies - of the fact that they are not of the particular communities that they've been working in, who are being abused and told certain things that they shouldn't be told. They're there to help a community. Many of them don't feel safe. They feel that once they finish, they're going to leave this province.

There is an issue, and this issue was there when I was a minister - of those medical students going into communities who are not comfortable with these individuals coming into their community. I'm trying to understand what is being done to address that particular issue.

AVA CZAPALAY: We're sort of fighting over who gets to take that question. Maybe we'll both take it. I appreciate your comment. I know that you're thinking of a particular example around medical professionals, but it can be a broader statement. Immediately I started thinking of the individuals who arrived from Kenya to work in the long-term care facilities in Mahone Bay, for instance. I'm going to give you an example of the work that's been done to help prepare for the arrival of those individuals and help the community prepare.

Staff from our department met with the community to talk with them about the individuals who would be coming from a refugee camp to settle in Nova Scotia. It's of utmost importance that they also settle well, have a chance to practise their skills and do their work, knowing that they're coming from a very different situation - not only culturally but just in terms of their freedoms. We did work with the community. We worked with the employer. On Boxing Day, a colleague and I went to Mahone Bay to sit with the individuals and have conversations with them about the challenges that they're seeing. We need to get it right so that they do feel welcome, and that the community understands that these individuals are hired because they have skills, they're there to do a job, and they're there to do a job that would otherwise be unfilled if they weren't there.

It's an ongoing process. I won't say that our department can be everything to all people, but we're happy to lead a conversation, and we're happy to lead by example. We're happy to provide resources and information to employers, to other employees, and to communities to make sure that people settle well.

SCOTT NAUSS: The only thing I would add is that I would encourage these people to speak up, to call our department. We have a 1-800 number, and we have an email that's staffed. Occupational Health and Safety staff would respond to the situation and provide some guidance.

DAVE RITCEY: It was mentioned earlier that the Technical Safety division is working with Nova Scotia Power to implement processes that will reduce wait times for customers. I'm just wondering if you can talk a little bit more about that process and the timelines.

THE CHAIR: Mr. Dolan. They're looking at you.

JEFF DOLAN: They're looking at me. The Technical Safety division, because the chief electrical inspector works on our team, is in the department. We've had a long-standing professional relationship with Nova Scotia Power. Nova Scotia Power is the designated inspection agency for the majority of the province. They're issuing the majority, if not the full share, of electrical permits for electrical work being done in the province before any type of connection can be made for energizing of whatever the installation may be.

It's well known that there's been a significant increase in the work that's going Nova Scotia Power's way. The statistics they provided us - between 2019 and 2022, there was a 41 per cent increase in the number of permits being issued that would require an inspection to be done before that permit could be closed and that system or that product could be energized. In the first quarter of 2023, they were up 18 per cent again over 2022. Given our relationship, we're well aware of the complaints and concerns being communicated by the communities, by customers, that government is receiving, and they're being well reported in the media.

We've been part of a working group, along with the Department of Natural Resources and Renewables, since the Summer of last year. Nova Scotia Power has been quite candid about the fact that they were able to hire - and it's not only an inspection problem. They've hired people for the length of their process, whether it be someone who's receiving work details or the scoping of a permit application, scheduling an inspection, or the inspectors or the line crews who need to be in place to actually do the inspection. Nova Scotia Power has a 100 per cent inspection policy, which means they need to visually and on-site inspect every installation, whether it be new work or significant renovation before that permit can be closed, and then the power can be supplied.

While they've had success in hiring their staff, we recognize this is a larger problem and their system needs to be examined. Any processes they identify and opportunities they identify need to be approved by our chief inspector.

The work that's happening now is we're looking at new opportunities and new ways of working that are taking place in other provinces. The other provinces, as was a necessity during COVID, there was some success here in Nova Scotia where a 100 per cent visual inspection may have been the norm prior to 2019. We now know that it can be trusted that, provided a client is well-known and has a solid safety record, perhaps a remote inspection

might suffice, or digital verification of the work that was done might suffice in order to close a permit.

Also, we want to make sure that the risk management - the risk-informed approach to doing inspections - is maximized as well. A good example of that would be if there was a large development - whether it be an apartment building or a hotel - for an inspector or team of inspectors to go and do a full inspection at every installation, which is now the requirement, and that facility, that location, is time- and resource-consuming.

Taking into consideration a lot of factors, we're looking at opportunities for risk-informed random sampling to be done, random inspections to be done, that we're confident it's representative of that entire facility. We've met with Nova Scotia Power as recently as last Friday - senior members of their organization as well. It's definitely being addressed at many levels in our department, as well as with Nova Scotia Power. We're expecting to achieve certain levels of confidence and then begin implementing pilots of the programs that I mentioned this year.

THE CHAIR: We'll go to MLA Sheehy-Richard.

MELISSA SHEEHY-RICHARD: When we talk about safety and changing some of the requirements within these other areas that we've touched on, I would be remiss if I didn't want to touch a little bit and talk about the collaboration that you have with the Department of Agriculture and the agriculture sector, in particular when it comes to farm safety, the equipment on the farms, and ways that maybe climbing that 100-foot antique apple ladder years ago isn't necessarily safe in these kinds of days. I know that we're modernizing in that way, but I just wanted to know if you could touch a little bit on some collaboration work in that area as well.

SCOTT NAUSS: My two worlds collide: I'm a former executive director with agriculture. I've been involved in the work with the agriculture sector for quite some time. We started a pilot program with the farming association and farm safety group back in 2015, and we were looking at mobile equipment safety, confined space, first aid training - a lot of key issues that would impact agriculture and its employees. That work has been ongoing since that period of time, and during the pandemic, we really started to focus on temporary foreign workers. The bulk of the temporary foreign workers at that time coming to the province were working in the agriculture or seafood sectors. We were able to ensure that these folks had the proper COVID measures in place, but, as well, we began to make sure that they had a basic understanding of their rights and responsibilities, first aid training, making sure that a lot of the systems were in place, and that work has continued since the pandemic.

THE CHAIR: MLA Sheehy-Richard for a follow-up? No? Okay. We will go to MLA Lachance.

LISA LACHANCE: I wanted to ask about the Nova SAFE app. Can you share with us how long it took to be developed, who developed it, and what the total cost was? Also, I'm wondering about the evaluation of the app and how it's successfully measured.

SCOTT NAUSS: We are very proud of the Nova SAFE app. I'll start by talking about the development of it. The app was created by the Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety, and they've essentially created different apps for different jurisdictions. Most jurisdictions across Canada have a similar app. Our app is a little larger than average in the sense that we have 16 or 18 topics that are covered, as well as technical safety. We have it available in both languages.

I don't know the cost figure off the top of my head, but I could report that back to you. We began discussions with CCOHS probably back in 2018 or 2019, but we were able to launch the app within the last year. It took some time for them to build the technical safety resources into the app. That was kind of a new creation for them.

We're excited about Phase 2, which we hope to launch this year, in 2024. We'll have 16 additional new safety topics. As well, we're looking to expand our reach with new languages, so we're working with the ISANS to determine which languages we should incorporate into the app.

LISA LACHANCE: I was also wondering how successful the evaluation is. I know you mentioned user numbers, but what other criteria are you using or tracking in terms of what the impact will be of the app?

SCOTT NAUSS: We do know that we've had 20,000 users with 50,000 experiences. We have consulted with some of our trusted partners and received some feedback on the use of the app and usability, and we've incorporated some of those ideas in Phase 2.

THE CHAIR: Our next round of questioning will be MLA Mombourquette, MLA Hansen, and MLA Young.

MLA Mombourquette.

DEREK MOMBOURQUETTE: Interesting - Mr. Nauss, I was listening to your comments around workplace safety and the VON. I hear a lot of our home care support workers are going into situations - and they do incredible work. I've heard from some that they're concerned about how they're going into buildings and there are issues around safety at times, and it's not getting any easier. We're seeing more burnout. I could use a number of examples when it comes to this, but I'll use the home support workers who go in and support residents in communities.

Can you elaborate on the conversations you're having with them around the concerns that are being brought forward by their union representatives and leadership within the group - that workers are, in some cases, fearful to go into a place? There's a history of a potentially dangerous situation. I've had a conversation with a few in Sydney in the last couple of days where this is becoming more of a problem for them.

They want to do their work. They want to be safe doing it. My question is: How are those conversations going, and what is the plan moving forward?

SCOTT NAUSS: The continuing care sector is full of very dedicated professional people who put the care of the patient first. Every discussion that we've been having with them, we're really trying to, I guess, change that culture, in some ways, for them to also consider their health and safety up there with the client. If they're injured in the work and not able to report to work, they're not able to provide that care, and that person could, in fact, go without care.

A lot of our work has been focused with the VON in particular - they're a client that we're very linked with - around making sure that folks are properly trained on identifying hazards, and that hazard assessments take place before, as you mention, they walk into the building. Is the walking surface safe? We have a lot of falls this time of year, on ice. Are there potentially violent dogs in the area? Are there potentially violent family members? Are there any objects in the home that could create a safety hazard?

Then, if a hazard is identified and the care worker cannot address it, they need to work with their manager to address that problem over the long term, so that they're able to return to work safely.

DEREK MOMBOURQUETTE: Thank you for that. I appreciate it.

As you talk about those assessments that happen, whether it's a pathway, potentially dangerous individuals in the area - is all of that happening now? Do you go through that process with them? Is that set up now, or is that just done through the organization itself?

SCOTT NAUSS: The employer is responsible for making sure that all the policies and procedures are adequate in the workplace. We provide advice and share best practices with the employer, but the employer is ultimately responsible. I mean, they know their business, and have a direct line with the employees, who know the hazards. They're responsible to develop those standards, those assessments, and make sure they're working for them in their particular workplaces.

THE CHAIR: MLA Hansen.

SUZY HANSEN: The Nova Scotia Federation of Labour is campaigning right now on the misuse of NDAs in the workplace. The Occupational Health and Safety Act entitles all employees in Nova Scotia these basic rights. You know them. It's the right to know, the right to participate, and the right to refuse work. I'm curious to know: How is the department addressing this misuse of NDAs?

[2:00 p.m.]

THE CHAIR: Deputy Minister Czapalay.

AVA CZAPALAY: Our focus is to ensure, first and foremost, safe workplaces and that both employers and employees have a role in ensuring that there is a safe workplace. One of the mechanisms for doing that would be the Joint Occupational Health and Safety Committees, consisting of both employers and employees, that are in place to provide a place where workers can take problems. We also encourage workers, if they identify issues in the workplace, to take that to their manager, but if that fails, take it to the Joint Occupational Health and Safety Committee.

I also mentioned that we have the ability for people to report to 1-800 numbers if they see something or they experience something. They may want to do that anonymously or just reach out and ask us for help. We're there and ready to help and guide people through whatever they might be facing.

SUZY HANSEN: If someone is experiencing a situation, they need to reach out and go through the same processes as they would if the 1-800 number or the Nova SAFE app - does the department agree that the misuse of NDAs is wrong? Do you believe that workplaces shouldn't be utilizing NDAs in a way that can harm employees?

AVA CZAPALAY: Our focus is on making sure that employees feel safe at work. As per a previous question, we're not presuming what comes into play or not; it's how that employee feels about their workplace. If they can't resolve the situation internally, then we want employees to know that there are external options for them, and one is to report anonymously or one is to report in person. We can definitely guide people to a place where they feel more supported and safe.

THE CHAIR: MLA Young.

NOLAN YOUNG: I'm just looking at the Safety for Everyone slide. I think there was a focus there that included youth and new workers to the workforce. Just looking back on my years in construction, I think way back 20 years ago at the Anthony Henday when they were building it. They'd say that so many people are going to die or get hurt in that. Now it's totally shifted the other way to no injuries.

My question is around communication. What's the intent to roll out some of the communication to youth and new workers?

THE CHAIR: Mr. Nauss.

SCOTT NAUSS: The WCB injury rate's very clear - that youth workers are at risk. There's a higher risk. They have more injuries than maybe more experienced workers. We've also consulted with youth groups, and what we're hearing from them - it's no surprise that they prefer to have their information electronically. Print media isn't how they seek out information. With that in mind, we did create the app. We're using many channels, social media, many different reaches, to try to appeal to youth to use our app. We've promoted it, for instance, at the community college to the community college safety program as well.

NOLAN YOUNG: They're a former employer of mine, so yes. Thank you so much.

THE CHAIR: A little plug from MLA Young there. That's good.

MLA Ince.

HON. TONY INCE: I'm going back to a question that my colleague Mr. Young raised earlier about tradespeople coming here from other provinces and so on. My question is: What's in place for the apprentice? Is there the same sort of format? Is there something additional for the apprentice? Again, we know that the apprentices are key to helping us grow those areas and those jobs.

THE CHAIR: Deputy Minister Czapalay.

AVA CZAPALAY: It's my second-favourite topic, to talk about apprenticeship. The Canada Free Trade Agreement allows for Red Seal trades to flow from one province to another, and have their credentials and their skills recognized.

Similarly, apprentices, even though they don't come under the Free Trade Agreement, they are covered so that their hours count from one province to the next. Apprentices, for example, can transfer from one province to another and have those hours come with them. Is that what you were getting at with the question?

TONY INCE: Yes.

AVA CZAPALAY: Okay.

THE CHAIR: No follow-up needed, MLA? All right.

MLA Sheehy-Richard.

MELISSA SHEEHY-RICHARD: I sat on the Veterans Affairs Committee last month - I don't normally sit on that committee - and we talked about the importance of peer support for veterans. Colleagues around the table - I think you were at that meeting too - really encouraged the witnesses who were present that day to do your guys' survey online. In fact, I asked the clerk of that committee to share the survey with them directly so they don't even have to go look for it, and they can just share it with individuals in their network, so to speak. Is it too soon to say if any additional information came in since then, specifically around peer support?

SCOTT NAUSS: I can't comment specifically on that engagement, but I can say that the department is a big supporter of peer-on-peer support. We know that when trauma in the workplace occurs, there's no better person to help a colleague than a colleague who's experienced similar trauma. I can think even amongst our Occupational Health and Safety officers, we have a network - the OSM team - who will counsel. I've been a beneficiary of that counselling myself, having visited a lot of accident scenes that were quite gruesome in nature.

There's also a network of peer support groups, Helping the Helpers. We support that group. They have annual meetings, and we attend. We provide some financial support, but we also share best practices from what we're seeing in the sector. I can't comment specifically on that situation, but I can say the department's a big supporter of peer-on-peer supports.

TONY INCE: My question is about labour standards, and safety, and so on. I used to be a longshoreman. There's one thing that I do know that hasn't been done - and I don't know if it's changed because I haven't been down there in a number of years. Many of the workers when they've got to go up on those high containers, and up on the ships and everything else, I know that there was at one time a policy that says they should be wearing harnesses and things. They're still not doing that. Can you help me understand how that particular profession, which is high in accidents, can operate without doing those proper things that they should be doing?

SCOTT NAUSS: I'll start off by saying that longshoremen are federally regulated, so the provincial standards do not apply, but I will speak to the provincial standards. Any time an employee who's working at a height greater than 10 feet and there's a risk of falling, is required to have some form of fall protection, whether that be a harness - which is probably the most well known. It bolts to an anchor point. It can include a guard rail surface all around the area so that the employee can't fall, or it can be a bump line so that on a flat surface, it prevents - it's a barrier that prevents the employee from getting to the edge. Those are your three most common forms of fall protection.

I will say that we've focused very highly on the construction sector. Almost 40 per cent of our inspections are in the construction sector, focusing on working from heights as being the number one hazard.

We've recently started to get some feedback from clients, and we're seeing it in some of their data that there are falls happening in other sectors. You alluded to the transportation and the movement of goods - the logistics sector. We have started this year to broaden our scope when it comes to addressing the fall hazards to include other sectors. We're hoping to make some inroads in some of those situations that you talked about, keeping in mind, though, that longshoremen would fall under federal jurisdiction.

TONY INCE: That's the challenge with that particular job - the combination of provincial and federal regulations that are in play. Are you having any conversations with the feds? I can go from here to Quebec to Vancouver, and I would say 60 to 70 per cent of the jobs in that particular sector, they don't pay attention to any of those safety standards. Or I wouldn't say they don't pay attention. Let me say there's a lack of real paying attention to some of the things that are really dangerous. Myself, I've almost fallen off a couple of the containers.

Are there conversations with the feds looking at that particular issue, or is it something I'm just raising now?

SCOTT NAUSS: I will say that there's a group that's comprised of each provincial jurisdiction and the federal jurisdictions that are responsible for safety, known as CanOSH. They meet monthly, and they meet in person annually. They talk about common issues. A good example of that is the trucking sector where you have provincially regulated folks working alongside federally regulated folks, and folks who operate in both areas.

With that in mind, we have done some joint work locally here in the Atlantic region with HRSDC, which is the federal regulator. We're starting to do some good work there jointly with them, but you mentioned that there is more work to be done. We urge any employee who's working at a height greater than - in our case it's ten feet, but in the federal case it's actually six feet to use proper fall protection.

THE CHAIR: MLA Ritcey.

DAVE RITCEY: Just a question around Nova SAFE. It seems like it's a great tool to improve accessibility and safety for all. Can you speak to how it can fit into the Safety Branch's commitment to accessibility?

SCOTT NAUSS: We're so proud of that app. I think the place where it really helps us connect is with youth. Again, your colleague earlier asked a question around youth. Youth do not want to get their information from books and print material. They much prefer electronic means. It's also a great mechanism for us to connect with folks who are working off-hours. We talked earlier about health care and home support workers who are often working nights and weekends. This is a great opportunity for them to get access to information 24/7.

[2:15 p.m.]

We know the makeup of the Nova Scotia workforce is rapidly changing. We've had an influx of new Nova Scotians joining us, many of whom have different languages and backgrounds. That's why we're looking to expand the Nova SAFE app to connect with those folks.

We've achieved that accessibility standard so that it's easily operated by folks with hearing impairments or visual impairments. We're really glad to connect with those folks, who are often marginalized.

THE CHAIR: MLA Hansen.

SUZY HANSEN: We talked about employees going into unsafe workspaces, and one of them that I'm going to talk about is teachers going into sometimes-unsafe workspaces within the classrooms, or maybe within the school at times. I'm just wondering: How is the department addressing some of these issues that are happening right now? Our numbers are higher over the past few years when it comes to violence in schools. How are we, as a department, helping to address some of these issues when it comes to that?

SCOTT NAUSS: As you pointed out, violence is increasing in the workplace. It's very unfortunate. The Violence in the Workplace Regulations would apply to classrooms. All employers are responsible, where the regulations apply, to make sure that they have completed that hazard assessment and put corrective measures in place to prevent violent incidents.

I would urge any teacher who feels unsafe to work with workplace parties, whether it be their joint occupational health and safety committee, their union, or their principal or manager, to help resolve some of these issues. If they still feel that they don't have resolution, they can always approach the department. I will say the department has had some discussions with the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development around outreach around violence in schools. We're looking at connecting with schools to make sure that they have all the information that they need to help make their workplace safer.

SUZY HANSEN: I'm glad to hear that. Thank you for saying that, because I know for a fact that there are a number of teachers, one in particular, who goes to school with Kevlar outfits on because they're that unsafe. I'm glad to hear that there are steps in place, and moving forward, if they need to, they're able to reach out to the department for help, and you're going to be working with the Department of Education in that realm too. I appreciate that. Thank you very much. That wasn't a question. I apologize, Chair.

THE CHAIR: I'm in a good mood, I'll allow that one. MLA Young, MLA Mombourquette, and MLA Ince.

MLA Young.

NOLAN YOUNG: I'm just curious - a bit more about the department in general, or the Safety Branch of it. Could you maybe talk a little bit about some of the things that the Safety Branch may be involved in?

THE CHAIR: Mr. Nauss.

SCOTT NAUSS: Our work at the Safety Branch is really categorized, I think, and I touched on this earlier, in four different categories. We strive to effectively set the safety requirements. Workplaces are changing. I've been involved in Health and Safety now for approximately 20 years, and workplaces are changing more rapidly now than I've ever seen in the last 20 years. AI could potentially be coming on board. We're seeing many new faces and people of different backgrounds joining the workforce. Things are rapidly changing. Unfortunately, we're seeing incidents of violence creeping up into the workplace at an alarming rate as well.

We strive to make sure that we've got meaningful, impactful regulations that employers and employees can comply with, because regulations are no good if folks cannot actually meet the requirements.

Then we seek to get this information out there. We have a team that's known as the awareness and outreach team. They go into workplaces, they provide lunch and learns, information. They can assess a workplace and even provide some recommendations around next steps to help improve their health and safety program. They can attend Joint Occupational Health and Safety team meetings to provide some advice to help build that infrastructure. We have an information group who, if any employer or employee or workplace party wants some additional information, they can call in the department and this team will make sure they get the information that they need.

We have an inspection and compliance group, both on the occupational health and safety side and technical safety side. These professionals go out every day into the workplace, and those are the folks you hear about who are at workplaces, making sure that the workplaces are compliant with the Act and regulations. When we do have a breakdown in the system and somebody is injured or unfortunately killed, we do have investigators who are able to go out and gather that information and evaluate it. If long form prosecution is required, those are the folks who put together that package and present it to the Public Prosecution Service for the laying of long form charges.

NOLAN YOUNG: I'm thinking of WorkSafeBC. I'm thinking of some other outfits that had all the information in one place with videos and stuff. Is that sort of what the Nova SAFE app is? Maybe you could comment around that.

SCOTT NAUSS: It's interesting that you mentioned WorkSafeBC, because that is one of the jurisdictions that we're looking to borrow some great ideas from. Jeff actually used to work in B.C., and he's able to share a lot of his great insights that he learned while working in B.C. You're right, we do have our information in a couple of different places. We have some on our website, but our ultimate long-term vision is to have it centrally located on the app for everyone to access it in multiple languages.

THE CHAIR: MLA Mombourquette.

HON. DEREK MOMBOURQUETTE: I have a couple of quick questions. It goes around to the fact that we know there's lots of construction everywhere. We see it in Sydney with the community college and the hospitals. There have been a lot of commitments made over the years through successive governments, and this government has made some decisions around infrastructure.

My question is, and it goes to the vacancies in skilled trades: Can you update the committee on how many skilled workers we're going to need in the province?

AVA CZAPALAY: I was parsing through that, going, "Where is the safety piece to that?" (Laughter) We've had conversations with this committee before on the shortage of skilled trades workers in Nova Scotia. Our department, through Immigration and Population Growth and the Nova Scotia Apprenticeship Agency, are working very hard to help close that gap.

I'm sorry, I don't have the numbers at my fingertips today, but I will say a couple of things. One is that we hope to bridge the gap by bringing more people into the skilled trades, raising awareness of what a great career - and you outlined a couple of opportunities in Cape Breton, but throughout Nova Scotia, there's a lot of work that needs to be done. There's essentially a lot of great careers there for young people who want to practise a skilled trade, but also retaining more skilled trades workers. We've mentioned before that the retention rate is low in the skilled trades. It's something like 45 per cent. The national average is about that too. How can we get more people to consider thoroughly what practicing a skilled trade might be, and then enter it with eyes wide open, let's say, and stay with that skilled trade?

The government recently announced \$100 million for apprenticeship modernization. A lot of that is toward the retention of people in the skilled trades system. To link it back into safety maybe - making sure that people arrive with the right credentials. Some people arrive without paperwork, so let's have them demonstrate their credentials.

Then the employer gets to say, “Yes, they are an experienced carpenter. Let them challenge the Red Seal exam and move into that practice.”

We also have a partnership with ISANS - the Immigrant Settlement Association of Nova Scotia - to help newcomers understand what practising a trade looks like. Recently, we had some missions to both Toronto and overseas to recruit skilled trades workers, taking the Construction Association and employers with us so they could speak specifically about what it’s like to practise a trade in construction in Nova Scotia - everything from weather to conditions.

I have full confidence that we will be able to use that \$100 million very wisely to bridge the gap, and to have the skilled trades workers that we need within the next five years. We’re going to take measures aggressively to move toward that.

DEREK MOMBOURQUETTE: I appreciate that. It’s always a case of governments will make commitments to infrastructure and programs, and they set deadlines. You look at the labour, you look at skilled trades, and you ask: How many of these important projects that are around housing and trying to deal with the housing crisis and stuff, how far out will they be pushed if there’s an issue around skilled trades? It’s something that I’m very curious about because, as I said, we’ve been through it with the construction boom in Cape Breton. It’s been great. It’s been wonderful. Everybody’s working, but there are other projects now that are going to need to be done, and we’re going to need the people to do them.

My question is: Is the department looking at making training for skilled trades more accessible through the high schools? That was always something that I supported, whether it was in skilled trades or even in energy for that matter - exposing kids and students to the trades more so they can have those opportunities. Are you looking at doing anything else throughout the school system?

AVA CZAPALAY: Important partners in that would be the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, as well as the community college, and also the unions. I think I mentioned before to this group that there’s the - I forget the exact name - the trades demonstration centre in . . . (Interruption) Yes. There’s also the tradesmobile - the truck that drives around to all communities in Nova Scotia, and young people get to see what a trade looks like. The idea with the centre in Prospect is that all schools - and I asked the person who runs the centre how many schools in Nova Scotia visit their centre, and they said, “Every single one.” They visit the centre, I think, around Grades 8 and 9 to take a look at what the trades look like in terms of the reality of being a bricklayer or a painter or electrician. We have some practical ways where young people can be acquainted with the skilled trades.

We’ve also, through the minister’s pre-apprenticeship panel that met in the Spring, had some recommendations around how young people can be exposed to trades earlier in

their secondary school - I think as early as Grades 7, 8, and 9 - to help young people see that a career in the trades is a really good career with definite work attached to it. But also, we need people's help. Everyone at the table here can help. We need parents to understand that an opportunity in the skilled trades for their child is a really good opportunity. It's not a second-best opportunity.

THE CHAIR: I almost said "amen" after that. (Laughter)

MLA Ince.

HON. TONY INCE: We talked about physical safety, health and safety, and so on. Is the department currently collecting data on how many workers are off due to mental illness or physical illness?

THE CHAIR: Deputy Minister Czapalay.

AVA CZAPALAY: We see that information through the Workers' Compensation Board reporting. They also report on trends - for example, if a trend is going up or down. We know, for example, that health care workers sustain injuries in the workplace, and then we can see from the reporting if they are getting more claims or fewer claims as the year progresses.

THE CHAIR: MLA Sheehy-Richard.

MELISSA SHEEHY-RICHARD: I'm going back to first aid. Safety first - I feel like the topic is on this. Lots of good things to ask questions about.

What steps is the department taking to ensure that workplaces are going to be prepared for these newer first aid requirements?

THE CHAIR: Mr. Nauss.

SCOTT NAUSS: As you mentioned, the Province of Nova Scotia, as well as many jurisdictions, has adopted standardized first aid across the country. It's a great step for labour mobility. In the past, if a worker transferred from, say, New Brunswick to Nova Scotia, there were different requirements and the kits were different. Now there's consistent training across the country, and consistent kits. I understand it's led to a cost savings of \$1.5 million for employers.

Specifically, what the department is doing to ensure that employers and employees are in compliance with the Act. We've done a promotional campaign. Again, our 1-800 number is open to anybody who wishes to call in and ask any questions about obtaining first aid or the applicability of the first-aid training that they have, if it's still in compliance.

That's really where we've given support so far - on the promotion as well as answering any questions and concerns that folks have.

[2:30 p.m.]

MELISSA SHEEHY-RICHARD: What are you going to do to determine that the contents and the terminology that are used are consistent across the province? Is there going to be . . .? I'll just let you answer that, instead of speculating.

SCOTT NAUSS: There is a CSA standard, so all jurisdictions have adopted that CSA standard. It clearly lays out what needs to be in a first aid kit, as well as what's required to meet the requirements for acceptable first aid training.

THE CHAIR: This is a first. It's 2:30 p.m. and I have no names on my list for further questions.

MLA Hansen. I'll put that out there. Thank you.

SUZY HANSEN: Thank you for saying that. I was like, I think I'm next - I don't know.

Early on, there was a discussion about gradual-onset stress as a part of the new changes of the amendment. I'm just looking over the Act, and I'm looking at the fact that it doesn't give a specific definition or qualification. So I'd like to know if there is one now of what the definition of what gradual onset stress would be.

AVA CZAPALAY: Let me see how I do, and Scott can fix up whatever I get wrong. I think the key feature of gradual onset stress is that it's persistent, ongoing stress, and that it's stress that has impacted someone's health so much that they are unable to execute their duties at work. It's not someone, for example, who might be stressed by a performance review or upset over a comment from a colleague that one time. It's persistent and ongoing stress.

SUZY HANSEN: I'm glad for the clarity because I was like: What is gradual onset stress? Anyway, in saying that, when I did some research on psychological assessments and some of those things that are happening, some employees are experiencing racial discrimination, racism, and all of these other isms that are happening within the workplace, and it doesn't fall under psychological stress, or it doesn't fall under that bracket. I was curious to know what that means. Persistent and ongoing, for me - and I'm not a doctor by any means - I would think that racial trauma would also fall under that.

I would like to know if there will be a clarification of that. It doesn't have to be today, but I'd like to get that information so that I can look into how we can better suit

folks who are in the workplace by maybe, possibly or not, amending the bill that's forward now.

AVA CZAPALAY: Let's commit to following up with you on racial trauma specifically, and we'll do that. I do want to also say that our public consultation on harassment and bullying in the workplace was meant, as I'd mentioned earlier, to be without parameters, asking Nova Scotians: What are you experiencing? What the team has reported back to me is that people spoke very openly about the spectrum of workplace trauma that they're experiencing. I'm looking forward to seeing what that report shows, but also how we can take the information in that report and strengthen our Occupational Health and Safety Act and our regulations.

We'll get back to you specific to that piece, but we're interested in all areas of workplace safety, and making sure that people can show up and feel safe, and can do their work without harassment, bullying, racism, microaggressions, the whole spectrum.

NOLAN YOUNG: As part of your modernization with safety around the trades in particular, are you looking at anything around some of the documentation requirements, whether it's your hazard IDs or orientations? Is there any movement in that direction yet?

JEFF DOLAN: One of the areas we are exploring is digitization and administrative efficiency. Speaking to some of the questions asked earlier around labour mobility, it may not solve the work shortages, but it will make it easier to come into the province and work, provided you're qualified to do so. We're looking at first establishing the policy or the legislation that will standardize all the requirements and making it so it's regulation with the lightest touch.

Then wherever possible, we're going to be issuing digital credentials to individuals, ideally digital credentials to workplaces. So if we're issuing a safety permit - whether it's gas work, electrical work, and possibly even today where someone is waiting for something to come in the mail so they can post it at their worksite and they can begin that safe work happening - we're going to be trusting the fact that there are electronic records. We're now set up and getting better set up to manage that and to share that information. We want to streamline our processes.

Similar to the mindset with the app, we want to trust the fact that an individual or tradesperson can carry their proof of certification with them 24/7. The days of having to verify it in person by an inspector are, for obvious reasons, behind us. We're following the trends that we're seeing in a lot of other areas. There is no magic solution to this, but what we're seeing is that there are a lot of opportunities we're capitalizing on on a regular basis just to fine-tune the process. Opportunities like the Nova SAFE app allow us to get real-time feedback from industry to hear what those opportunities are, and also, the minister has established a Technical Safety Advisory Board. Whether it's mobilization or digitization

or some sort of standard issuance of credentials, if we're hearing from the board that's made up of senior representatives of those industries, then that becomes our priority.

THE CHAIR: Are there any more questions from our MLAs around the table?

Well, you've obviously done a great job answering questions today. I just want to thank you for coming today. It's been a great conversation. I'd like to offer the opportunity to end with a closing statement.

AVA CZAPALAY: I hope this committee has now seen with these colleagues that the trend continues at LSI. We have passionate, committed colleagues who are very well informed and who practise their responsibilities with diligence and care.

I just want to emphasize - and I think your questions brought this out, but to kind of tie a bow around it - the conversation is that no sector and no employer is exempt from offering a safe workplace. I also want to underscore that employees also have a role to play in safe workplaces. They can work with our department and their employers to ensure that the work they're being asked to do is safe, and conducted in a safe way and in a safe environment.

Our department has a number of ways in which we can work with all Nova Scotians, employers and employees, to ensure that everyone who comes here - whether they're a newcomer or someone who's been here all along - has a safe and welcoming workplace, and can execute their responsibilities without concern of whether their personal safety or mental safety is going to be impacted.

THE CHAIR: Thank you to all three of you. At this point, we'd like to ask that our witnesses be excused, and we'll take a three-minute break just to unwind. Then we'll come back for some committee business here.

[2:37 p.m. The committee recessed.]

[2:42 p.m. The committee reconvened.]

THE CHAIR: Order. If I could ask our committee members to please come back to the table. Thank you again to our guests.

Just a bit of committee business that's listed here. On December 22nd, there was a letter from the deputy minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing in response to requests for information made at our December 5th meeting. This was forwarded to all members last week and again yesterday. Is there any discussion on that letter? Seeing none, thank you. We'll move on from that.

The other piece of committee business was a motion that was left on the table from our December 5th meeting on addressing the need for affordable housing and increasing housing supply in Nova Scotia. I believe that was a motion by MLA Hansen. MLA Hansen, I'd like you to please read the motion again for the table.

SUZY HANSEN: 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.

As of December 5th, there were 1,068 people sleeping rough who were accounted for. Thank you.

THE CHAIR: That last comment that you just made was not in the motion from previous. Was that just a comment you were adding?

SUZY HANSEN: For the record.

THE CHAIR: Just so the record knows that last comment you made was not in the motion.

SUZY HANSEN: I can do that. Just for the record, that last comment was not a part of the motion. Thank you.

THE CHAIR: Thank you. Any discussion?

MLA Young.

NOLAN YOUNG: Regarding the motion and writing a letter, our government is in partnerships with other departments, municipalities, community organizations to address issues with people experiencing homelessness or sleeping rough. In the past two years, there's been a 261 per cent increase in funding to find supports and solutions for people who are experiencing homelessness. Some of the supports would include 474 units that we've added - that's \$23.4 million - that includes tiny homes, The Bridge program, the Diamond Bailey Healing Centre. There's a whole list, and I've tabled it with the Clerk so it can be shared.

We've also added 232 new permanent shelter beds across Nova Scotia, 105 temporary Winter units, and there's also an increase of 35 housing support workers. Our government recognizes the issue and is working diligently to address it. With that said, I

don't see the need in writing a letter, because it's something that people are working around the clock to find solutions.

[2:45 p.m.]

THE CHAIR: Any other discussion on the motion?

SUZY HANSEN: I'm glad that you provided the information with the numbers and the amounts of money that have been allocated. By my math, it still doesn't accumulate to 1,068 people as of December 5th that were unhoused - and I said banning Winter evictions to prevent this crisis from worsening, and open as many shelter and supportive housing beds as there are people sleeping out of doors.

I do appreciate the calculations. Winter is here and it has been here for a bit of time now. I just want us to have it in writing so that we can be reminded of the fact that this is a priority, and we need to work on that.

THE CHAIR: Seeing no other discussion.

All those in favour? Contrary minded? Thank you.

The motion is defeated.

THE CHAIR: Our next meeting will be Tuesday, February 6, 2024, from 1:00 p.m. to 3:00 p.m. The topic will be Firefighters' Mental Health Support. The topic was postponed from last Fall when we were sitting in the House. Witnesses will be the Halifax Professional Fire Fighters Association IAFF Local 268; Fire Service Association of Nova Scotia; Office of Addictions and Mental Health; Nova Scotia Health - Mental Health and Addictions program.

Thank you, everyone. Our meeting is now adjourned.

[The committee adjourned at 2:47 p.m.]