

HANSARD

NOVA SCOTIA HOUSE OF ASSEMBLY

COMMITTEE

ON

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS

Wednesday, January 12, 2011

LEGISLATIVE CHAMBER

**Department of Community Services
Rent Supplement Housing**

Printed and Published by Nova Scotia Hansard Reporting Services

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In Attendance:

Mrs. Darlene Henry
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Auditor General

Ms. Evangeline Colman-Sadd
Assistant Auditor General

WITNESSES

Department of Community Services

Ms. Judith Ferguson, Deputy Minister
Mr. Dan Troke, Executive Director, ESIA & Housing
Mr. George Hudson, Executive Director, Finance & Administration



House of Assembly
Nova Scotia

HALIFAX, WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 12, 2011

STANDING COMMITTEE ON PUBLIC ACCOUNTS

9:00 A.M.

CHAIRMAN
Ms. Diana Whalen

VICE-CHAIRMAN
Mr. Leonard Preyra

MR. LEONARD PREYRA (Chairman): Good morning, it's 9:02 a.m. and I'd like to call this meeting of the Public Accounts Committee to order. Happy New Year and welcome to the first meeting of 2011 for the Public Accounts Committee.

Today we have before us the Department of Community Services. They will be talking about rent supplement housing, a chapter in the November 2010 Report of the Auditor General. We have witnesses today from Community Services and next week we're not exactly sure, but Ms. Ferguson is here as outgoing Deputy Minister of Community Services and incoming Deputy Minister of Labour and Advanced Education.

Before we go too much further, maybe we'll start with a round of introductions.

[The committee members and witnesses introduced themselves.]

MR. CHAIRMAN: Welcome, everyone. I think we'll start, as we normally would, with a brief presentation from the department, followed by a 20-minute question period each.

We'll start with Ms. Ferguson.

MS. JUDITH FERGUSON: Good morning, Mr. Chairman. Thank you very much and I'd like to thank you very much for the opportunity to be here and perhaps just for information purposes, I also will be attending the session next week, as well, just for clarification.

Happy New Year to all of the committee members and I'd like to thank you all for the invitation to come and speak today about housing programs in the Department of Community Services. I'd also like to thank the Auditor General, and his staff, for his report and his recommendations. In the department we are always continually looking at ways to improve our programs and service delivery to the clients we serve, so we appreciate this opportunity both to have the comments from the Auditor General and to take this opportunity to respond and to outline all of the great work that we currently have going on in the department.

I'd like to say at the outset that we will not gloss over the importance of the recommendations of the audit, we take the audit and its recommendations very seriously. We are very pleased that the recommendations are consistent with the work that we had been undertaking in the department since 2007, to strengthen our policies, standards, processes and procedures, and we hope to have the opportunity this morning to talk about a lot of the work that we've been doing since 2007.

In the Department of Community Services, with the clients we serve and with the programs that we provide, we know that access to safe and affordable housing is fundamental to making life better for families in Nova Scotia. That is why we have a number of programs and services in place to help Nova Scotians in need to access affordable housing. These programs include home repair programs, public housing and rent supplements.

The Rent Supplement Program, which was a topic mentioned by the Auditor General in the audit, provides affordable housing for hundreds of Nova Scotians in a very efficient manner. The department continues to take the steps necessary to ensure that the Rent Supplement Program will be delivered with procedures consistently applied across the province. For example, in 2007 the Auditor General made recommendations about housing authority policy and procedure manuals. Since then the staff have been working very diligently to update many sections in our housing operation manuals. I'm very pleased to say that when the Auditor General completed his review, most of the recommendations made in 2007 were moving forward or almost done.

I would like to say that the overhaul of the policy and procedures manual is an extensive piece of work and I think it's a logical question to ask why it hasn't been completed by this date. It's not simply an updating of policies but it's actually looking at the substantive issues that form the basis of the policy manual. So there was a large amount of work that had to go into this, including jurisdictional research, looking at practices in other jurisdictions, looking at how we do things now, and asking ourselves some very

fundamental questions around how we deliver our housing programs to Nova Scotians, so it wasn't a simple update.

The other fact is that in our estimation we would have had this manual rolled out by now had it not been for the fact of the federal stimulus money, because a lot of the same people involved in the policy manual update are the exact people who we needed to call on to roll out the stimulus money across the province, to make sure that we took full advantage of those dollars. So that's not an excuse in any way but just a reality of the staff that we had in the department. While we had to pick a priority and had some significant timelines around the stimulus money, I do want people to know that the rolling out of the policy manual and the work involved remains a significant priority for the department and we haven't lost sight of that.

Some of the 2007 recommendations are still a work in progress and I think I just talked about one of those, although my expectation is that within the coming months they will be completed. I'll give you an example of that. The Tri-County, South Shore and Annapolis Valley Housing Authorities merged into the Western Regional Housing Authority on December 1, 2010. Since then the housing authority managers, who are a wonderful group of people who we meet with on a regular basis, have been working to ensure that the application processes are consistent throughout the province. Staff are moving forward with training in 2011, to ensure the new policies are understood and are of benefit to the people we serve. We are a large department, we have a large number of staff across the province, and our programs are - some are legislated, some are regulatory, and we have policies, obviously, in all of our programs.

Certainly in the time that I have been in the department it has been a consistent piece of work across all of our programs that we've worked very hard to ensure that our policies are interpreted by our staff in a consistent manner across the province. In our housing program it would be no different than our income assistance program or our Services for Persons with Disabilities Program, and sometimes practices develop across various regions of the province for a number of reasons. We have been working on a large scale with our staff to ensure that the clients of the department receive the same services whether they're living in Yarmouth or Sydney, so this would be no different than that.

We've taken a number of steps to do that and certainly have been working on a consistent and constant basis with our housing authority managers to make sure that we understand the differences that happen from region to region, because the other thing we've learned is that the issues are not all the same across Nova Scotia, and we also have to be cognizant of that and make sure we are doing the most we can to help the clients we serve in a way that makes sense in their communities.

The department does establish budgets both for rent supplements and for the Affordable Housing Program, to ensure that we help the most families we can with the dollars that we have available. In the department we don't set aside a specific number of

rent supplements. This is because rent supplements are tied to income. However, we do the very best we can to help as many people as possible with the dollars that we have available.

Since 2002, the department has developed three requests for proposals to generate interest in the affordable housing new rental program. We are pleased with the response and continue to receive proposals. The information in the original RFP is the basis of the requirements that are still being used today to assess the proposals that we receive. Our staff work closely with the proponents to encourage every opportunity to meet the criteria and to develop a successful affordable housing project.

I know that from personal experience - and I'm sure that Mr. Troke can speak to that in more detail today in terms of how we work with the proponents in order to develop a proposal that will work for everyone and that will meet the criteria that have been established in order to access these funds. Proposals, particularly from the not-for-profit sector, often change from their original concept to the final product and that is just a piece of the regular work that we would do on an ongoing basis.

Since every proposal is different, we treat each one as they are different. However, the requirements for the proponents are consistent. For example, things like rents charged, anticipated tenants and long-term demand in the area are all documented for a project to move forward for approval. Any affordable housing projects that have rent supplements are set up and monitored by the housing authorities. This means that the department is directly involved with the building's landlord and the tenants. For those few developments that do not have rent supplements, the department has agreed to and will conduct compliance testing in a similar way that we do with other programs like our Rental Residential Rehabilitation Assistance Program.

We are also putting in place a process that will ensure that policy and procedure manuals are reviewed and updated on a regular basis. Performance results, measures and targets are already in place for the housing authorities, and we will and are already starting a process to expand upon those. Although the department monitors these activities, we will formally document them in the upcoming year.

Housing authorities have budget targets and five-year asset and maintenance targets for capital replacement. Since 2009 the housing authorities and the department have worked almost exclusively through the economic stimulus program to build new homes for families, seniors and persons with disabilities, and to renovate, refit and repair the province's existing social housing portfolio.

Our Social Housing Agreement Programs and Affordable Housing Programs are audited on an annual basis by PricewaterhouseCoopers on behalf of CMHC and we have always been found to be in compliance with the policy. As part of the department's policy review, we've updated certain parts of our inspection process to ensure that every unit is inspected prior to somebody moving in.

In conclusion, I would like to again thank you very much for the opportunity to speak here today, and thank the Auditor General and his staff for the assistance they've provided to us as we look forward to continually updating our program for the benefit of our clients. Obviously the work that has been done helps us to improve what we do, and it ensures that our programs are effective, sustainable and in the best interests of the clients that we serve. Thank you very much.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Thank you, Ms. Ferguson. It's 9:14 a.m. and we'll start with the Official Opposition, Mr. Younger, the member for Dartmouth East.

MR. ANDREW YOUNGER: Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and thank you for the presentation. Obviously I think we probably all agree this is a very important issue and I appreciate the fact that right off the bat you haven't tried to make excuses for some of the deficiencies and that you're working on them. I think the Auditor General has pointed out some important issues.

I guess I want to start - it's probably easiest just to go through in order, some of the recommendations and comments and observations of the Auditor General. On Page 12 of his report, Paragraph 2.14, there's an observation regarding wait lists. What I'm wondering is, it doesn't necessarily result in the direct recommendation there but there is an interesting observation that there appeared to be no historic wait lists, so what I'm wondering is, how do you measure your success on wait lists over time if you don't have access to historic numbers over time?

MR. DAN TROKE: First, a wait list, any program that you deliver, any service delivery, you have individuals who are looking to provide that service. I guess what we've found over time is that rather than focusing on the wait list, we focus on how fast we can turn around units, get individuals into those units and look at it from a perspective when the rental industry in general, and not just public housing but when we talk about rentals in general, normally you're looking at about a 3 per cent vacancy factor at any point in time.

[9:15 a.m.]

Our focus around that is how fast can we turn over units, offer units to individuals. Again, individuals can be on a wait list and they may, in fact, reject a unit that may come along, so the function of the wait list is making sure that chronologically people have equal access and have an opportunity to get to the unit and that we offer it to them. Again, our focus is mainly on how many units can we turn over when they become vacant and get to those folks on the wait list as fast as we can, in order to be able to get them into the units in a timely manner.

Our wait list, and as pointed out by the Auditor General, it's a snapshot at any point in time about the number of folks who are looking to access the units that we have.

MR. YOUNGER: I recognize that it's important to have that snapshot in time. What I'm concerned about is performance measuring over time, so you conceivably could have every person in this room on the wait list at a given time. Some of those people may ultimately be more or less eligible for different types of housing yet, as I understand it, there are different wait lists and they are basically chronological for different properties.

How do you measure - if I ask you, well, where are we today versus five years ago in terms of addressing people on the wait list, how long they're on a wait list, whether they receive the appropriate housing, or maybe they come off the wait list because they suddenly got a job as an MLA and they don't need to be on the wait list anymore. There are so many reasons why they come off that wait list, I guess, I think it's important to be able to identify your success or failure in terms of dealing with the issue of people needing housing.

MR. TROKE: I think the point that I was trying to move towards was that we really focus on how efficient we can be at delivering what we have for individuals. You're absolutely right that the chronological wait list is all about making sure that individuals have equal opportunity and chronologically nobody jumps the queue to get a particular unit.

It is true that your wait list can be a function of - people may decide not to take a unit that is offered to them, so that does create some difficulty in trying to say one point in time versus another point in time. I guess really what our focus is and some of the new measures that you're going to see us start really moving towards is that it's all about how efficient we can be in making sure units are made available to people as fast as possible. The wait list, really as it stands today, is more about making sure that people have that equal opportunity to accessing the unit in a timely fashion, so it really is a little bit of a different piece than necessarily talking about efficiency, it's more about talking about transparency and access to the units.

MR. YOUNGER: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I think that's important and you referenced where you're going with the change in procedures. I think we all understand that they have to be updated over time.

You talked about equal opportunity, I'm wondering where you're going with the changes in regulations and procedures in response to the Auditor General's Report. How are you going to define equal opportunity? I'll just describe what I mean, to be clear on that. We can look at equal opportunity as being whoever applied first and is just generally eligible to the bare minimum requirements, or we can define equal opportunity, that instead of having one wait list, have multiple wait lists where people are triaged, almost like a hospital setting, based on relative need. So what direction do you anticipate going?

MS. FERGUSON: The wait list issue obviously is more complicated than just the wait list and you've alluded to that, that there's a number of issues in terms of how you're there, why you're there and what it means. There is some significant work being done as

we work through that policy manual and there are going to be some decisions that are going to have to be made by our minister in terms of the direction we've taken.

Jurisdictions do things a number of different ways. I guess the biggest thing for us is from a thematic point of view, what's important to us is that we adopt a procedure that helps us move our clients through the wait list as quickly as we can. A final decision hasn't been made in terms of where we are going, but it is one of the areas that we're examining that we've identified a number of options and that we have to make some decisions on.

I can tell you that over the number of years I've been in the department, we've made some significant changes to the wait list protocol procedure in the department. Although it's far from perfect now it's significantly better than it was. It's now consistent, it's now done the same across the province and we've realigned the criteria in terms of the wait list piece.

Unfortunately, in the department we have a number of programs that have wait lists and there are challenges associated with all of those. We're continually striving to look at it in a way that we can meet the needs of our clients as best we can. We currently have a process now for emergency access, so you talked about equal access, so we already have a procedure today that basically does triage people, so there is an emergency access placement piece within our wait list policy, as there is in some of our other programs.

It's a complicated issue and there are a number of decisions that are fundamental to how people access housing that are going to have to be made, which will be made before this policy manual is rolled out, which will impact on what the actual wait list piece looks like. So I appreciate your comments, it always helps us to hear what people think about that wait list piece and we're going to have to make some decisions on that.

MR. YOUNGER: In moving forward with that, one of the things that the Auditor General and his office have pointed out or observed over and over here is that when they compared Annapolis and metro, for example, there seemed to be inconsistencies. If I'm interpreting that correct I hope the Auditor General will correct me on that. In metro it sounded like they had a set of procedures, they followed them, maybe they had been updated; in Annapolis there were more issues where they hadn't been followed.

As you move forward with changes in those procedures, that seems to me to be one of the most critical issues. It strikes me that regardless of where you live in Nova Scotia, you should know that the criteria for access to social housing or rental support, or whatever program Community Services offers, should be reasonably equal. What are you doing to ensure that those concerns raised by the Auditor General are addressed?

MS. FERGUSON: I couldn't agree more with your comments about the consistency of the program and any time it comes to our attention that we're not consistently delivering our programs, we go in and try to address those areas, regardless of

the program area, as quickly as we can. A huge piece of rolling out this policy manual is going to be a training process with our housing staff moving across the province and meeting with all of the housing staff, not unlike we did when we made significant changes to our income assistance policy. So hand in hand with rolling out the policy will go a significant piece of training that we're already starting to work on in anticipation of the fact that we're going to need to roll that out. Having said that, though, we're not waiting for that to correct when inconsistencies come to our attention. We've already gone in and done some work around some of the issues that you've suggested and we will continue to do that work.

Part and parcel of the policy manual will be a training process and not only a one-time training process, but an ongoing piece to help us work with our staff on a consistent basis. We will have to do some testing to make sure the policies are clear, in fairness for our own staff and for the people who are clients that need to read the policies, so we've been doing a lot of work in areas around really making sure our policies are understandable. Sometimes the issues are complicated, unfortunately, so we really need to work as a department. We have an obligation to make sure that the rules are easy to understand, they're easy to access for people because that will make it better for us, too, not only for the staff but for the clients that we serve.

We have done a lot of work and done a lot of talking about the fact that the manual is the manual, but what really matters is how it's interpreted by our staff on the front-line level and also to ensure that we do a better job of making sure our clients understand. We're not there yet, but it will be a huge part of what we do.

MR. YOUNGER: Have you determined why that has happened? In order to avoid this happening in the future, I understand that these things happen, but this can happen over and over again if we don't figure out why these policies are being interpreted differently.

MS. FERGUSON: Dan can add to this. My sense is when they're interpreted differently it's a number of reasons. Obviously, as the department - when the municipal transfer occurred the department inherited a number of different offices and as we tried to bring the policies together, obviously people at that time did the very best they could. Sometimes practices develop in offices for a number of reasons and over time that simply occurs. Sometimes, in fairness to the staff, the policy is ambiguous and it's open to some different interpretations, and as a result of that you start to see different interpretations develop.

My experience has been that there are a number of reasons why that has happened. We have tried, and in most program areas I would say very successfully, to try to move away from providing the opportunities for that to happen. Some of it is historical, like I said, because those programs developed.

With the merger of those three housing authority units it will be extremely helpful because we will have a manager of those three units who will go in and be able to work with the staff and realign how everything is done similarly in the same offices. It has been an overarching theme of what we've done in the department. There are few things less important than ensuring that clients have the same access to all of our services across the province, so it's very much on our dashboard. I can tell you that we're not going to rest until we make sure that that's actually happening.

We also have policy staff who actually sit in our regions now, who act as the liaison with the staff to make sure that they have someone they can go to, who understand, who have direct links into our head office from a policy perspective, so that they can ask questions on difficult cases. Although we do have a lot of policies in the department, they don't always cover every single situation and everyone is an individual and every family is different. Our staff try to do the best they can every day to meet the needs of those families.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Mr. Troke is signalling that he has something to say by way of a follow-up, if you don't mind.

MR. YOUNGER: That's fine, Mr. Chairman.

MR. TROKE: So if I could just add to the second part of your question and Judith talked to some of the subject that on the go-forward we now have five housing authorities in this province. All five of those directors meet regularly, meet regularly with head office staff, and we work through not just processes but also around what the expectations are, so how we're going to be moving forward.

To point to the western area of the province, we now have a brand-new director who is responsible and one of the key elements when he started on the job was we actually sat down and talked about these recommendations. We talked about the fact that we are moving forward, not only with new performance measures but also that these new policies - or the revised policies if you will - will be coming into place. We immediately, with the new individual in charge of operations, sat down and began talking about where the deficiencies were noted and how we can ensure on a consistent, go-forward basis that those are addressed. So that was one of the first things when the individual started.

Second, this smaller group, if you will, we have five individuals basically running five housing authorities now. They meet on a regular basis, meet regularly with me and other staff. One of the key pieces of every meeting as we're moving through is to look at ways that, number one, any issues that are ambiguous, that we're working through those so everybody is consistently taking those back; second, also providing them an opportunity to provide some input into the processes. Sometimes, even though a process might have been identified as a little bit different, it may not necessarily have all been a bad process.

We have to make sure we don't miss an opportunity, if we can do something more efficiently for the people who are applying for our housing.

MR. YOUNGER: I appreciate that answer. I would just say by way of follow-up that I think the challenge in Community Services is you are dealing on balance with the most vulnerable people in Nova Scotia society, arguably the people who are most impacted by the appropriate provision or the inaccurate provision of government services and so, I think it is important.

The one thing the deputy minister - and, frankly, this would probably predate all three of you in your current positions in any case - is that service exchange, if that's what you were referring to in the transfer from the municipalities, of course, goes back to 1996. We're into 14 years and it kind of troubled me when - I understand that you're addressing the issues and I'm glad you're taking them seriously, but if some of these issues actually are still fallouts from the service exchange in 1996, I think we really have to get a handle on it and move forward.

This actually leads me to the next question - I know I only have about four and half minutes, I guess. This actually relates maybe to the transfer, Paragraph 2.37, and I'm going to jump ahead where there were some observations around the inspection of units. I noticed that for new units - and I recognize you're probably assuming that the new units are built really well but you're relying on the municipal occupancy permit process and having come from a municipal background - actually, as it happens, a number of the MLAs sitting here today have - that occupancy process is based on a minimum standard, as it should be, it's just, did you meet the building code requirements? Is there any plan to change that and actually to inspect even new units, to ensure that they're meeting the standards that you expect them to meet if they're going to be funded by government money?

MR. TROKE: I believe, first, the point that was made up in the section here is around occupancy permits being recorded on file. We do know that an occupancy permit is issued for each and every one of the buildings that are developed. You're right, occupancy permits are a municipal responsibility. It also involves, in most cases with multi-residentials, involvement from the fire marshal as well.

We go through the same process when the province constructs their own buildings, we have a process that we work through. It's quite extensive on the ground with regard to the expectations of the fire marshal, the expectations of the municipality. I agree with your comments around typically it is reliant on the minimum building code, however, we found that practice, at least around the province, is that there is heavy involvement, typically at least from the fire marshal's perspective, that it does take that occupancy permit requirement above a minimum standard and we've had lots of cases where that has occurred.

[9:30 a.m.]

I guess really what it is, it's about the domain of issuing that occupancy permit is certainly the municipality's and from a perspective of building design, engineering, architecture, all of those pieces are part of what gets submitted by a proponent. So what we're talking about is professionals who develop buildings, design buildings, and then a municipality that approves their use.

We do rely on what they're requesting, without us going in and saying, this is what we want to happen in your jurisdiction. Really, at the end of the day, we do know that these are units that are being built to code. Most builders are building above EnerGuide 80 now, so from an efficiency perspective they're quite high, but also from the perspective that the fire marshal is satisfied that what you're seeing being constructed is something that they feel is within the expectation of safety for them.

MR. YOUNGER: Well, that might be the case but I have - and perhaps you have and other MLAs have, too - been in units over the past year, both in my own riding but also in Yarmouth, Glace Bay, Pictou County, that frankly I don't think should be allowed to be habitable. I've had the fire marshal go into units in my own riding where they say yes, we agree that people shouldn't be - and some of them aren't public housing units, in fairness, but just units where they will pass the minimum fire marshal's test on an ongoing basis.

I guess what I'm wondering is, you're inspecting existing units before people move in, you're relying on the municipal occupancy permit for new units, but it doesn't sound like there's a really robust system of inspecting these units on an ongoing basis if somebody is living in a unit for 10 or 15 years, to make sure it's still a healthy and safe place for them to be living - by the standards of Community Services, not the minimum standards that the fire marshal may have. I've talked to fire marshals in this province who feel sometimes, listen, I don't think it's a great place to live but it does meet those minimum criteria.

MR. TROKE: Sure, I'll be very quick. I think your comments are very fair. I don't think anyone would disagree that certain aspects of units that may be out there at different times may be very questionable but I guess the piece that I can talk to is all of the units that Community Services are responsible for, that we own and operate, are inspected annually. We have extensive capital plans and maintenance plans for those.

With regard to new construction of units - and I think that many of the units you may be talking about, if there are questionable practices, are likely units that have been around for some time or have been converted, so we're not talking typically about new construction. I will tell you that my experience has been that on new construction the fire marshals go in and typically say, this is what I want to see. There tends to be more capacity maybe for them at that point, at the early stage of the game, to say my expectations are, rather than saying something that has been up and operating for a period of time, at least

our experience has been that they tend to be fairly rigid with what they would like to see in those new constructions.

I guess we've looked at it from a perspective that we typically have building practices that are not only up to code, but tend to be beyond code in many of the efficiencies that they operate. Also, some of the requirements that we have around visitability - meaning barrier-free and easy access - mean that these units, typically from a construction perspective, do have other professional associations looking at them - engineers, architects and whatnot, so we have very much relied on it. It tends to put a very higher level of construction care on the onset.

With regard to ongoing units through the rent supplement, we do inspect every one of them. I would also point out that individuals also have access to the Residential Tenancies Board in any rental situation and that does provide remedy for individuals, even after we would inspect the unit. If an issue came to me with a landlord one day later, that individual does have abilities with the Residential Tenancies Board to make restitution if something is wrong with that unit or something develops with that unit over time.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Thank you, Mr. Troke. Mr. Younger, your time has expired. We'll move to the Progressive Conservative caucus, Mr. Porter.

MR. CHUCK PORTER: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. First I would start by saying thanks for being here this morning, it's good to have you here. I have a number of questions; however, I want to open with a few comments. One being, I am excited to see a merger in the Valley and throughout the western end of the province, not only because I come from that area but because I believe it's the right thing to do. I've stood in this House on many occasions and rambled - not rambled, that's not the right word, but anyway, I spoke passionately about the number of excess boards, districts, authorities, whatever they might be, the lack of consistency, how they do not function effectively.

This is what the people talk about in the coffee shops, especially when they're being asked to cut back. They see programs may be cut, things not quite the same, taxes going up. They start thinking about all of these extra administrative assets, if that's what we like to refer to them as around the province and they start talking about, why do we have so many of this and so many of that and they don't operate the same and how come he over here can have that and how come she can get in over there in Chester quicker than I can get in, in Kentville or Windsor? These are realities of the people of Nova Scotia, certainly in the area I come from.

I think that is a great thing, merging. I would also say, and I want to compliment the staff that I have had the pleasure of working with for five years now in the Valley, who have looked after the needs of the people who come to my door. I can tell you, they are nothing short of the very best and I say that because I deal with them regularly. They are

professional, they work within that policy. I'll talk about the policy a bit, too. They do everything they can.

I don't know what the rest of the province is like, I'm just going to assume that they're all the same, but I can tell you that we have great folks working out there and I know that they care about what they're doing. I wanted to get that on the record today for the deputy and for the new folks who may assume roles. I'm not telling you anything that you don't know, I'm sure, having dealt with them as well.

With that, I want to talk a bit about this policy piece. It seems to me that policy can be as difficult as it is good because people tend to follow this, some people as the black and the white that is written on the page. There seems to be a common sense factor that goes out the window sometimes, we're so stuck by this policy piece. There's not enough - I don't like to call it grey area but room to move, wiggle room, call it what you want, when it comes to doing their job. Their hands are tied in the Department of Community Services, whether it is clients who receive benefits or it's people who are trying to get into housing or both combined.

As for the policy, I'd really like to see the changes reflect the need of what it is we are actually trying to do for people in Nova Scotia. I'm not saying that's not being met, I think it has taken a long time to get it met and for a variety of reasons. In policy development, and I'm not sure how outdated it is - and that's going to be my first question. We're obviously going back and looking at policy and procedure in this manual and it started some time ago, as I am aware. You've talked about why it has taken a long time to do. How outdated do you believe it really is?

MR. TROKE: Certainly I will take your comments back to the staff in the western area because we would agree, they are working very hard and, with this merger, have been very supportive of where we're trying to go.

With regard to the policy manual, there certainly are aspects of the policy that have been updated over time through bulletins, to address certain aspects. So if there has been a change to, whether it be the income limits or if there are additional exemptions that have been made, I think the pieces that although have been around for some time, like rent supplement, doesn't necessarily mean that 100 per cent of any policy would have to disappear strictly because of the age.

There are thousands of people at the end of the day who received affordable housing through the rent supplement program but I think, to the point that the Auditor General makes and where we're going with this is, there are certainly pieces of this that we can modernize. Number one, for language, making it so that it becomes a little more plain language for individuals to be able to read and interpret but also, number two, making sure that it is as current and meeting the needs of those folks today.

Many individuals have entered into the rent supplement program and are there for a period of time and it has serviced them well. I think the key is making sure that those dollars that are there are being maximized, that the individuals can clearly understand what it means and how it works. Then part two, some of the other programs - the updates we're talking about are just making sure that the bulletins that have been issued over time get incorporated into the policy, so as opposed to it being policy and another piece and another piece, that it's one singular piece at one location that you can read and interpret and understand. Then there may be fewer issues that arise from trying to interpret something and actually making it more plain language.

To specifically address the question, probably one of the oldest ones that we have is the area of rent supplement, just strictly from an age perspective. However, again, there are many aspects of that policy, even though the ages are still very pertinent, it's just making sure that we modernize and update it to make it as plain language and as current as we can.

MR. PORTER: Thank you. I just wanted to add, and I guess I forgot, with regard to the Annapolis Valley housing situation, I hope when this merger is being put together that a lot of what they do is taken into consideration and comparing and developing what will be the model over there.

At the same time, I guess it's too simple. Maybe I over-simplify it; people need housing, we have housing, the process should be very simple. Again, policy unfortunately again is part of dictating how this works. I can't see why it would be different in Windsor than it is in Sydney. It's like the health care system, why do we do things differently in one hospital than we do in another? We're a population of less than a million, a small province. I have a very hard time understanding how we can possibly treat person A and person B different. Although families are different, as the deputy has said, the needs are very much the same and that same is that they need housing, for whatever the reasons might be and whatever the size, et cetera.

On that, and it comes back to this whole policy piece, it is a very simple thing and it has to be - I don't know if broad is the right word or not - it has to be a simple policy that does allow workers to make it happen, I guess, when it comes right down to it, and still within reason. I mean reason means a lot of things to a lot of people, they take it and interpret it differently. It should be a fairly consistent process because it is a similar process across the province. One need is not different than another, in my opinion, because they still need somewhere to live.

Realizing that priorities may be different - things happen, there are fires, there are emergent needs and those have been worked on in my area and done well, so just on that piece, I know there are wait lists, I know that people are often called and they are not ready yet, they refuse and you move to the next one. I think that works fairly well, actually, from what I've seen. I don't know wait-lists, I'm trying to think of anyone who has really been

a long, long time. They see it as long but again, I think that is reflective of the people who are working the area that I represent, knowing very well how it works, how to make it work the very best that they can. Maybe that has something to do with the wait list not being extremely long although as I said to the people waiting, every day is long.

At the same time, I haven't looked at the data to say, on average, how many days. Maybe you have that, maybe you don't. If you do, it would be great. Maybe you have a provincial number and that's fine, too. How long is the actual wait time if I applied today to get in? What is the average wait? Break it down for me, if you can, as narrow as you can, to my region, even if it is that western - I know you've been working in the western area and maybe you have numbers for the western area that would reflect the average wait time from someone applying to maybe moving in.

MR. TROKE: At any point in time, I'm always happy to sit down and talk about what's going on in any specific area. From time to time, we have inquiries from the members of this House to find out about where things are so I guess what I would offer is that at any time I would be happy to sit down and talk about kind of more specifics.

From a perspective of wait lists, it really does vary quite significantly, not just by region but even within region. It's probably not surprising that certain individuals would find some locations, maybe in a small town or in certain buildings, would be what they would like as their principal opportunity, so it really does vary.

[9:45 a.m.]

Truthfully, that is where some of the other tools, like the Affordable Housing Program and the Rent Supplement Program, have allowed us to add some capacity in communities where, when we find that those lists are starting to climb, where demand is climbing, we will typically then have non-profits or even for-profit individuals come forward and say hi, we'd like to build something in this community, so it starts giving us option B or option C often within those neighbourhoods where the demand is the highest or, in some locations, give us an opportunity where we don't have a unit.

They have been very successful in the area of the Annapolis Valley and particularly down through Kings, we've had incredible interest through the Affordable Housing Program. I think we're starting to head towards about 150 units that have been created in and around there and from a perspective of interest and development, it's probably one of the strongest areas in the province. We have a large number of not only for-profits but non-profits who seem to be able to develop about 20 units at a time in blocks, that is really giving us another option for those folks who are on the wait list in some of those communities, particularly for families.

I'd be happy to sit down and discuss specifics in the area. In fact, with the new housing authority director in that area, it's a good opportunity for not only him but for other

folks to get to meet him and understand kind of how we're moving forward but from a perspective of development in what we're doing. We really have found that things like affordable housing and the Rent Supplement Program have really given us an opportunity to accelerate those individuals through the process because it gives us another option, particularly in areas like the Valley where it has been very successful.

MR. PORTER: I look forward to actually sitting down at a point in time because this is an issue that doesn't go away, it's just an ongoing thing and that's fine. But it will be good to see what some of the new plans are, perhaps, and would only help me do my job as well and that's fine, so I look forward to that.

You talked about affordable housing, we have, I think there are nine facilities and we call them seniors' complexes in Hants West that I represent, I think it's nine. Those places are always being asked for and you're right, there are people who want specifics - they want upstairs or downstairs, they want a certain building, they want to live in Windsor or Hantsport or wherever. They are very particular about what they want but very often will accept something else if it does become available, certainly depending on their need and that's great.

What I'm wondering about, albeit you have some other agreements, how many partnerships or how do we go about those partnerships? Obviously we don't let just anybody as a supplement, we must do some kind of background, there must be something fairly detailed in that. Do you know what percentage - you can speak about that a bit - any idea what percentage of that is that kind of housing, outside of what the government actually owns?

MR. TROKE: Through the actual Affordable Housing Program, when we entered in new construction, I believe we're somewhere right now where we have about 40 for-profits and non-profits that have entered into agreements for the construction of new rental units. I believe that's the ballpark where we are, but the number changes every week because we have more and more developments that are moving forward, so to that point there is an extensive process that we go through that everything from requiring incorporation and various other aspects of just doing business, this is how we do business, but also from a perspective of what we expect to see and how the contributions are going to work and so on.

With regard to the rent supplement model, what happens is our housing authorities work with the landlords in any given community so they have relationships that they've developed. We do, on a regular basis, have individuals who would approach us. We do look at things like not only looking at the units themselves but also looking at, what has the relationship been with those landlords in the past, what are we hearing from tenants, so we want to find out are they a good landlord, is this somebody who is looking after the units, and so on. Also, we're the largest landlord in the province, so we are interspersed throughout those communities. These are individuals that we know on a regular basis, we

have tenants coming to, from, however it may work, to all of these various different landlords, so they are very well known, the relationships are very established in a three-way agreement.

Most typically what happens is you will have landlords who have been established for a period of time as having rent supplements. It's typically then when the new construction projects come up that we will then have an opportunity to have maybe a new landlord enter into the mix. For them it's a new relationship - and for us it is as well - but typically what happens is that's something that's discussed over months as we negotiate where we're going to go with the construction and then the opening of the building. It does give us an opportunity for the housing authority to develop that relationship with them and see how this is going to work.

MR. PORTER: How much time do I have, Mr. Chairman?

MR. CHAIRMAN: You have about five minutes.

MR. PORTER: Thank you, I have quite a bit to cover here yet. I want to talk about that relationship a little bit. We have Community Services clients who live in housing that is less than desirable in my opinion, what do we do as a Department of Community Services, or do we do anything? I know that the caseload is large for our workers and departments, but I have people living in a facility that is indeed - well, I can call it a "slum" but it's worse than that. We have rats and garbage and you name it, it's horrible.

There doesn't seem to be any involvement from the department by way of, we're subsidizing this rent because we're looking after them monthly, they're paying their rent with these funds. Do we have any involvement in that at all? Just because I'm short on time - not that I don't want a long, detailed answer, but if you could because I have a couple more questions for you.

MR. TROKE: First, if we're talking about individuals who - and I think you're referring to someone who would be on income assistance?

MR. PORTER: Right.

MR. TROKE: So with income assistance, certainly the funds that are provided to an individual, we don't put restrictions on how much of that they would want to use for - it's about choices. But to your point where Community Services typically becomes involved is that through our housing services groups we provide a program called the Rental Residential Rehabilitation Assistance Program, meaning we do have funds that are available, with conditions around it, that we can have older units that can be repaired, fixed up and whatnot. It's done across the province on a regular basis, year over year.

That program is really targeted at, number one, landlords who are typically looking at fixing up their units without passing on a rental increase to the client. When we hear of situations where we might have a challenge with a landlord, we also will approach a landlord and look at seeing if we can have units and challenges addressed. That doesn't necessarily get into the issue of how a building may be operated with regard to garbage pickup and so on, but what it does do is it does address issues like health and safety . . .

MR. PORTER: And these are the issues I'm referring to - and I don't mean to interrupt you there but I want to point this out. This place is bad and the issues are health related. We're funding it, so to speak, and you said the word "choices", that we all have choices. In the Town of Windsor, just as an example, there aren't many choices. We are short on affordable housing and that's part of the reason I'm asking these questions because we need to either approach someone or someone needs to approach you, I guess. I need to go start this process myself, maybe, for more affordable housing.

There were meetings in the past and I don't think they ever went too far, but we do not have enough if we've got places like this that exist. Windsor is just one example, there are many around the province like this that I don't know how they even get a permit to operate in all honesty, they're that bad, but people have to have somewhere to live, it's cold. They're generally not cheap, but on the cheaper side of rentals, so it's a problem within itself. We have to continue to work on that and that goes back - I don't have a lot of time. Did you say 9:55 a.m. is my time, Mr. Chairman?

MR. CHAIRMAN: No, 9:56 a.m.

MR. PORTER: The maintenance schedule is something I didn't get a chance to cover, but I do want to cover just briefly - and you can talk to it - the facilities that we call our own. You're the biggest landlord in the province. The senior complexes, how often are these facilities - if I recall, once upon a time it used to be that when you moved out, generally the carpets would be looked at, it would be cleaned and so on, but I've come to realize it's not quite every time somebody moves out, it's now more than that. I understand budgets and there's only so much money, et cetera, that's always the rule that comes back, but the person moving in is never generally happy with that as an answer. I'm wondering, how often are these looked at?

MR. TROKE: What we've done - and this is over the last number of years - is put a capital asset maintenance plan in place, it's actually about a 20-year plan when you look at the life cycle of how things work. To your question, you're right, every time an individual moves out we may not replace the carpet or whatever. What we do is when that individual moves out we do an inspection of the unit and that information is put into our system to compare to what the expected life cycle was. If the carpet is still in good shape, you're right, we may not replace it, but we do look at painting and cleaning and so on when individuals move in and out of a unit.

What has happened, particularly in the last year because of the economic stimulus, a lot of units are being refurbished because the opportunity is there to put them on a new life cycle, so maybe take carpets out and put something else in and so on. That means you may not see as much turnover on things like flooring because what we're putting in tends to last a lot longer than the old stuff. That being said, every one of these have their own plans attached to them and there's an expectation of that life and we basically plan, to be honest, whether the unit is vacant or not, over a period of time to look at how we can replace that on a regular basis.

MR. PORTER: Do I have time for another question or am I expired?

MR. CHAIRMAN: Your time has expired. We'll move to the government caucus, Mr. Epstein.

MR. HOWARD EPSTEIN: Thank you very much, Ms. Ferguson and your staff, for the presentation, it was very helpful, very useful and I guess to you personally, congratulations on your new position that's about to start. I should also say thank you for the work you've done in the department, it has been a difficult go, I think, it's a tough department to be involved with in many ways.

One of the things I thought was particularly helpful about the approach to the question of rent supplement housing that was the original focus of what we're here to talk about today, is that you offered us a broader context of what it is the department does and I found that helpful to approach it as an aspect of affordable housing and the issue of offering the citizens of the province, what you called, safe and affordable housing as something that's fundamental to what governments should be striving to achieve. That, I thought, was particularly helpful and I do want to ask you questions about some of the other aspects so we understand the context.

Since part of the audit and some of the comments talked about policies and perhaps some inconsistencies in interpretation and application of the policies in different parts of the province, I wonder if I could start there. What I wondered first was, what information does the department put up on-line so that it's available for all members of the public who might want to know about not just the statutory framework, but the programs and, of course, the policies of the department - and that would extend to anyone who wants to read it, but I have in mind probably advocacy organizations and citizens at large. What does the department actually put up and what does it not put up?

MS. FERGUSON: Dan can speak to some of the specifics of housing. Over the time I've been in the department we have tried to move to be overall much more accessible and we've heard lots of really good comments today from you and your colleagues, which are helpful to us around the whole policy piece. There are a number of program areas, in particular with income assistance, where we have our entire policy manual on-line. I'm looking to Dan in case I misspeak.

We have a lot of policies in our income assistance program; unfortunately, some of them are complicated despite best efforts to really try to make them simple and easy to understand. When some of our program areas like income assistance, like our early childhood areas, we have moved to putting as much as we can on-line. We have a fabulous Web master in the department who's extremely talented and creative, so not only putting them on-line but putting things on-line in a way so that they're grouped together and easy to access.

We've tried to do a lot of work in the department and we're not there yet, but it's a theme around really not looking at us from a program approach, but really looking at us from a client approach. If you're trying to access services as a client in the department, what do you need holistically as a client? We are trying to look at accessing our Web site more in terms of bundling services, so it's easy for you to get in and look at all of the services, perhaps, that may be accessible to you.

It would be our intention, when we complete the policy manual with our housing and we've done the training, that we would provide everything we can on-line so that it's transparent. I think another piece of that, though, that goes hand in hand with that and we've done it in our income assistance program, is we've actually created a smaller booklet that really hits the high points of the policy, so the policies we know from our clients and from our front-line staff that really are primarily the ones that people are interested in and would impact them most of all. So in conjunction with having the policy manual putting things on-line, an actual little booklet that's written in plain English that we actually focus-tested with groups of our front-line staff and clients, and that has become a bit of a best practice in the department and certainly something we would hope to do. That will take us some time to get there.

[10:00 a.m.]

In terms of the housing piece, it's not on-line today but it will certainly be our intention, as it will with any program that we have, to really make sure that absolutely everything we can put on-line that we do put on-line. In addition to that, we're beginning work on a service delivery redesign project in the department, which is really an extensive piece of work, looking at how we deliver services to our clients with two central themes of having a client-centred approach, so really looking at what we have in the department that can help you and doing it in a way that makes sense for the clients; and secondly, really looking at helping our front-line staff in terms of freeing up their time to do what they want to do, which is really spend time with the clients in a much more holistic way, to look at all of the services we deliver so that we can do a much better job of delivering those services to the clients.

So what are some pieces of work that our staff in every program are doing today that are taking away the time that we really know they could be helping, really working with our clients to help them make sure they're getting absolutely every service they can

from the department. So in conjunction with that piece of work, it's certainly my hope and expectation that we will see a significant number of changes, I guess not only in terms of philosophically how we deliver those services but certainly how people access them.

I think there will be a number of things that will be ongoing over the next couple of years that will result in extensively better service delivery and certainly opportunities for our staff to spend more time working with our clients, which I think is important for everybody.

MR. EPSTEIN: Well, electronic resources certainly provide the opportunity to give the people of Nova Scotia a more open and accessible and, I would say, effective government in all respects. I'm glad to see the department is thinking so seriously about this and taking action on it.

You did mention that the income assistance aspect is now almost completely available and you mentioned that the intention was to have the housing policies up and available, as well, on-line. Is there a timeline? I heard you mention the possibility of one or two years. Was that a target date or was that an estimate? What time frame are we contemplating? Is it possible to say when the housing policies will be available and on-line?

MR. TROKE: We're looking at the next couple of months to have the housing authority policies updated and in place, so we're kind of shooting for that new fiscal year window to be up and running. We will then move to get as many of those policies, not just on the housing authority side of things, if you will, about how we provide housing, but we're looking at the whole gamut of housing services as well as to how we get that information up on-line. We don't have a specific timeline but we're trying to do it as quickly as we can to get it up there.

Certainly what we're trying to do, though, is the changes that are coming forward with regard to how we provide housing to individuals and those policy updates, we're trying to get those in place within the next couple of months.

MR. EPSTEIN: Okay, that's helpful, thank you. Moving now to this issue of the broader context of affordable housing overall, I noticed, deputy, in your opening comments that you gave examples of programs. You talked about house repairs and you talked about public housing, as well as rent supplements. I'm wondering if there is a summary way of identifying the different housing programs - if that's the correct term - that the department does have, or if not programs, then categories of activity because it seems to me that I might think of some others.

I would think, for example, that the province is an owner of land, so land banking to a certain extent certainly was part of the thrust of the housing policy in Nova Scotia at one point. As a residual landowner, it can be said that we continue to land bank and we do

have seniors housing as a sort of special example of some things, there are co-ops, there are shelters, supportive housing, those things. I'm wondering how these different stray examples, supportive housing for young mothers in Dartmouth and so on, should be analyzed and thought of? Is there a suggested list that you might offer us of how we might think of the different categories of affordable housing and the programs or supports that the province offers?

MR. TROKE: That's exactly how we've tried to organize the Web site that we have with the Department of Community Services. Once you kind of click on housing, or are looking for housing, those different options come up. So from a perspective of, are you looking to develop a project, are you looking to obtain housing, or are you looking to, and all of those we kind of broadly do it in about four areas that then kind of subdivide down a little bit farther on the Web site. Really, from a perspective of what we've been doing over the last number of years is really focusing on two aspects, one what we're able to do in connection with . . .

MR. EPSTEIN: I'm sorry, developing one low what?

MR. TROKE: In two areas where we're looking to kind of increase our capacity in providing more housing is either (a) through the area where we're partnering with other parties to either develop additional affordable housing, or (b) where we are developing it ourselves. For example, under the economic stimulus where we're constructing new units or through the Affordable Housing Program where we are looking to develop units third party. So we have another party who is developing units, but certainly trying to make them available for individuals of low income and within certain criteria.

With regard to trying to summarize or categorize, we really tried to capture that on our Web site from a perspective, do you own a home, are you renting, are you looking to develop or are you looking for - and we kind of go through a very short list that once you kind of get into that list, it then subdivides you even farther as you go down through that.

It's a fairly high-level, helpful approach, but as the deputy was saying, we very much are also looking at how we can continue to make that information more available and more user-friendly. I would also say if there are aspects of that that you see as being a little too complicated or not plain language enough, we also encourage people to let us know about that as well and we try to make those changes.

MR. EPSTEIN: I do actually have a question about economic stimulus, but before I turn to that I wonder if we could talk about how the department tries to assess the supply and demand with respect to affordable housing community by community. I heard comments from some of my colleagues this morning in their questions that focused on some of their communities - Windsor, for example - in which it was suggested that there might be a need for a particular kind of housing.

I'm assuming from the perspective of the department you must be able to think province-wide about all the communities and you must have some feel for whether there is any kind of mismatch in communities between what it is that people - especially taking into account changing demographics - might need over the next coming years, now and in the coming years in terms of their housing and what's available. Can I ask first, does the department think about that and if so, is that information available, or can you speak to this problem for us?

MR. TROKE: We do look at the data regularly and what I mean by that is first we have a rental market survey that's done annually by our colleagues at CMHC. We also do another survey ourselves, usually every two to three years, that looks more at the single family market. We look at things like in communities where multi-residential isn't typical, where you get into more single or double-style rental units . . .

MR. EPSTEIN: Excuse me, can I interrupt. Are you saying that you would start by thinking about the private market first and what it does and then move to the public need to fill? What are you saying?

MR. TROKE: What happens is, CMHC does a rental market survey that looks at what effectively the vacancy rate is in any given community. We layer that for ourselves with our own units and what we have in any given area.

A typical market would see that if you have a vacancy rate of higher or lower than 3 per cent, it has indicators as to what's happening in that market. We do look at that as an aspect where a community may be experiencing difficulties; that's the private sector. We typically would layer that then with our own stock and the number of individuals we would have on wait lists, are we building more units ourselves and look at the impact of that on that community.

The second part to that, though - and you hit on the issue of demographics - there's a large segment of the population that when you start seeing demand climbing in certain communities, it's often related to things like services if you have certain aspects of what people are looking for. So that, too, will often cause a vacancy rate to fluctuate very fast in a particular community. When individuals are either applying for our Affordable Housing Program or when we're looking to construct units, we look at those areas where we would see maybe a very tight rental market, so you see costs climbing for the individual trying to acquire rental, or if we see an influx of population in that community, layering that with what we already have as what we can offer people on our wait list, those factors we look at regularly.

On an annual basis we try to review if we were going to build something ourselves where would we go and then as we are receiving proposals from outside sources, does it make sense based upon the raw data and then we drill that down a little bit further. We do require individuals who are applying for the Affordable Housing Program to do a need and

demand study for the surrounding, not necessarily the town, but the specific area that they're looking for within a given town as well. We basically are looking for, is there sufficient demand that those units if they're constructed are going to ensure that you're going to have decades of use out of those units.

MR. EPSTEIN: The data that CMHC generates would extend to analysis of the percentage of income, I take it, that people would be spending on their housing?

MR. TROKE: We usually also break data up for our own purposes by some income stratum, but we also look at kind of the age, the demographic strata as well, because as you alluded to, type of housing is very, very particular. You could have a community that is very rapidly aging and so a proposal that would come in that is placing emphasis on either young singles or family may not be as much in demand in a certain community as it might be for seniors, but it can also be the inverse in other communities where you have a very young population age who don't have access to certain housing, so we do look at that and we do try to stratify the data on multiple levels ourselves. That is part of where we go when we see a proposal from a third party about need and demand and who the client base is going to be. We layer that with what we already see happening in that community.

MR. EPSTEIN: Could you give us some specific examples of communities in Nova Scotia that you think might have the greatest need or where there might exist the most striking mismatch between what's available and what the needs or demands of the population are?

MR. TROKE: Sure, what maybe I can do is, I can give you an example of a community where we did see that. For example, about five years ago in the Town of Truro there was a very tight rental market, somewhere around the 2 per cent range. Through the Affordable Housing Program, through some construction of our own, there have been several hundred units created in and around the Truro area. This is both just purely the private sector market doing its piece, the non-profit sector doing it, as well as the department. What you now see is a vacancy rate in the Truro area of somewhere just above 3 per cent. What it means is, it provides a little more choice for individuals, it also means that you have a market now that there seems to be more sufficient supply for people who are looking for an affordable housing option.

So I guess what I'm saying is that you can see within a four- or five-year window in a community that has high demand, you can see that turn to a more balanced market which means that for those low-income individuals looking for a housing option, number one, there's more out there which is important, but number two, obviously what we focus on is, is there more out there within that price point that means those folks who are below our income levels can access a housing unit.

MR. EPSTEIN: Are there a few communities, as of right now, that you could identify as being perhaps most in need or that you could anticipate in the next year or so being most in need?

MR. TROKE: We have a lot of proposals that come through our door at any point in time. I think that everybody looks at certain aspects of a community and tries to make a point as to why they would see that community as having need, and each of them very valid, I mean from their own perspective. It then gets down to if we can provide an affordable, sustainable option, based upon the proposals that we see.

[10:15 a.m.]

I don't have any one specific community that I could say is in greater need than the other but certainly what I can say is that we've had, and some folks here have probably seen the maps that we put together, I don't think there's part of this province almost that we haven't been able to work with groups, in order to be able to get projects off the ground. We'd love to be in a position to fill that map up with more dots than there is space so we're going to take those proposals and move forward. I think, more importantly, that any and all proponents who are out there who see an opportunity to service low-income individuals, we sit down and we talk with them and find out if there's an opportunity to do something there.

MR. EPSTEIN: Okay, I see my time is up for this round, so thank you very much.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Thank you, Mr. Epstein. We do have time for a second round of questions. I believe we have about 11 minutes each and we have about 10 minutes of committee business after that.

Before I call on Mr. Colwell, I'd like to welcome Mr. MacMaster, the member for Inverness, who has joined us since our round of introductions. Mr. Colwell.

HON. KEITH COLWELL: Again, welcome here. It seems like we see you here quite often regarding housing issues. I want to state again, as I did the last time, that we're very pleased with the people who work in our community, trying to provide affordable housing to my residents. The work the staff does goes above and beyond what you would think of a civil servant typically. I just want to pass that along, if you would, because we do really appreciate the hard work they do.

I've got a couple of questions here. This is an organization we don't interact with very much but it's in my area, it's the Preston Area Housing Authority. Could you give me a little background on that? Just a short version because I don't have much time here.

MR. TROKE: The Preston Area Housing Authority is a small group that provides affordable rental in the Preston area. It is basically a group that created rentals through the

Social Housing Agreement. Most of the units that they own and operate were part of the Social Housing Agreement. They've since paid off all of their mortgages so that they are a non-profit housing organization today.

They meet regularly, actually we even have some members of our department sit on that board. They actually are a group that very much are looking at not only what they are operating but looking towards what does the future look like and some of the opportunities for them to see if they can play a bigger role not only in the community but in the work that they're doing. They're very active these days, not only looking at who the players are on their board but also as to how they can have greater involvement in the community. I believe right now they're operating somewhere around maybe 30 rental units over in the Preston area.

MR. COLWELL: Yes, I'm familiar with the areas they represent. There are some properties they have there in one particular community, which I don't want to identify here, of course, that are sort of in real bad shape. Problems with all kinds of - it would be a slum area if it was described any other way and it is just a few properties. They don't seem to get a handle on that very well and I've got a lot of complaints from neighbours around the area. Do you have any input in that, to see if that could be rectified?

MR. TROKE: Right now, as I mentioned, the board of the Preston Area Housing Association is really looking at not only what they have today but kind of where they are going to go into the future. I will say that they have contacted our staff, we've done some work, kind of doing an analysis of the condition of the units that they have. I know they're working towards putting an even greater, if you will, maintenance plan in place and to how they are going to deal with the stock, but also, part two, they're looking at how they operate and what they do.

So I'm certainly happy at any point in time if there are specific concerns, to take those not only to the board but to the - we can look at them through our inspectors who do a lot of work for the Preston area housing association, so if you want, off-line we can even talk about that. More specifically, I do know they have just undertaken in the last - I think it was about two months ago that we did a condition analysis of the stock that's there and we're looking at what units are in need of the first dollars that they're going to be putting forward with regard to the capital repair plan that they have.

I would suspect that if you have specific units that seem to be in more need than others, in all likelihood those would be the ones that would be first on that list to have work that would be done on them but second, also, at any point in time - like we have a very good relationship with the board, the board interacts with us on a regular basis and, as I said, we're involved in their meetings. If there are certain units that you know of or you're getting any issues around, feel free to pass them along and I'm happy to take a look at them.

MR. COLWELL: We'll do that. This is the exception; this is not the rule. There are some incredibly well-maintained properties and it's only just one or two that are really a problem and they're a serious problem, according to the neighbours anyway. I've personally seen it first-hand and it is a problem. I will pass that information along. You've probably already got them on the list to rectify anyway.

I'm going to ask a different question that I didn't get a chance to ask yesterday of the deputy minister, a real simple question. Is it necessary for all the caseworkers in the Department of Community Services to have a social work degree?

MS. FERGUSON: Just so I'm clear, would your question be on every program that we have in the department?

MR. COLWELL: No, this would be just the caseworkers who deal with recipients of Community Services funds - not a caseworker in housing but a caseworker who would actually work with individuals for income support, medical support, direct financial support really.

MS. FERGUSON: Okay, thank you. As things are currently in the department, we have a number of different classifications of caseworker and requirements for those positions, some of which are required to be social workers and some of which aren't, so it really depends on the nature of the work. I don't believe that everybody needs to have a social work degree to carry on all of the tasks that go on in the department, but I very much believe that some people do need to have a social work degree. That is the way that things currently work in the department. It varies from program to program so it would vary from income assistance to child welfare to services for persons with disabilities to housing.

I think what's important is that we try very hard in the department to do training with our various groups of staff, around the programs, the policies, but also around obviously the needs of our clients. So it's important for us that our staff have the capacity that they need to have and the tools available to them to make sure that they can provide the best services they need for clients.

Certainly as you go up through in terms of the various positions in the department, if we get into some supervisory positions and those kinds of things, then there are different qualifications that are required at that level.

MR. COLWELL: Really what I was asking is the income support area. If someone is a caseworker there, do they have to have a degree in social work?

MS. FERGUSON: Currently they do not have to have a degree in social work to be an income assistance worker and I don't believe necessarily that they have to have a social work degree. I think there are some areas where it's obviously very helpful for people to have a social work degree and certainly our staff have access, if they aren't social workers,

to people in their office who would be social workers. Our staff get together on a regular basis to talk about clients.

I talked a little bit earlier about service delivery redesign and really looking at the kinds of services and how we deliver them to our clients. Obviously it's really important for us in the department that we access the services of all of our staff and that we work much better horizontally between program divisions together, because often we would have a number of staff in different programs who are providing services to one client or one family. I think what is really important is that we make sure we have the right skill sets so we can provide the absolutely best services we can holistically to that client.

MR. COLWELL: Great, thank you. I just wanted that information; I didn't get a chance to ask yesterday.

In Lake Echo there seems to be a need for a housing unit, we don't have one. I've only got one in my whole riding and that's in Preston which, thankfully, the department is fixing up and we have, I think, almost 100 per cent occupancy. I know when I was first elected there was a less than 50 per cent occupancy, but we've been working on it and I know your staff has been too. We want to see it full and, indeed, I believe it is now, or so close that there might be one apartment left. But in Lake Echo we have a large number of seniors who just can't live in their own homes anymore. Maybe you can send me, or the committee, the information - and you went into it some here already - what detailed process would we have to go through to ensure that, or have a chance to get a facility in a place like Lake Echo?

MR. CHAIRMAN: That sounded like a request for information and I'm just wondering what the request is again, sorry, I missed that.

MR. COLWELL: The request is what criteria - again, you've already outlined some of it to my honourable colleagues here - if you could send us the information, what are the complete criteria needed for a senior complex to be built in an area like Lake Echo?

MR. CHAIRMAN: Thank you. Mr. Troke.

MR. TROKE: We have had inquiries from different residents in the area, we've also had some inquiries from individuals looking to do developments in that area. Typically the process would be that if we had a group - for-profit, non-profit - that was looking to develop a seniors project in the area then they would, at a very high level, sit down and we could have a discussion around what they were trying to accomplish. I can send you directly what we have as kind of our list of criteria and then that would be something you'd be able to share in any group that would be looking to develop units, or whatever, in the area.

We have had some inquiries and we have had discussions with several non-profit groups that have kind of explored the option, but I will make sure that I get that criteria to you so you'll have it for any groups that you'll be dealing with.

MR. COLWELL: That's great, I appreciate that. Also, how do you track to make sure that someone has affordable - when a private contractor builds a unit, how do you really follow it to make sure that there's still affordable rent being charged after four or five years into the process? What tracking process do you have for that?

MR. CHAIRMAN: Mr. Troke, a short answer because we've already run out of time, but I'll give you a chance to answer that question.

MR. TROKE: Okay, very quickly. First of all, in most of the units we have rent supplement agreements in place that are three-way agreements. For those units that we don't - and it was part of the discussion in the document here and you heard the deputy say that we actually are starting a compliance process where similar to what we do under our RRAP program, a letter would go out where the tenant would confirm what they're paying for rent and distribute that back to the department, that way we can verify what the rents being charged are and do they meet the actual agreement that took place, so we can make sure that everybody is in compliance.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Thank you. We will move, then, to the Progressive Conservative caucus. Mr. MacMaster.

MR. ALLAN MACMASTER: I have a couple of questions I'd like to ask on behalf of my colleague, the member for Hants West. I'd like to thank the Department of Community Services for making themselves available today. My first question is about the time frame for turnaround for if somebody is leaving a subsidized rental unit and somebody new is coming in, do you have sort of an average target turnaround time for that?

MR. TROKE: Obviously we try to, when we know that an individual is leaving a unit that we would immediately, upon the vacancy of the unit, have somebody else be able to go in, that's every landlord's desire. What we try to do is make sure that at any point in time we wouldn't have any more than 3 per cent of the total units kind of in that flux, and that's a very typical standard that the industry uses when they're trying to look at their portfolio management. So it's not a specific number of days per se.

When we have tenants identify that they are leaving, though, certainly what we try to do is have a very short turnaround time that when that person vacates, we do any work that would need to be done and have the next tenant immediately move in. From time to time more work would have to be done and we make sure that gets done, but the person moving into the unit knows when they're going to be getting the unit, when the work is going to be done. If it took, for example, a week to get that amount of work done then that tenant would know that on, let's say, January 20th, that unit is going to be available to them.

Typically what we do in those circumstances is, that allows the individual, as soon as the unit is cleaned up, they can start moving their items into the unit. But we try, at any given time, to have no more than 3 per cent of the units kind of in that state of flux and moving them as quickly as we can.

MS. FERGUSON: Mr. Chairman, if I might, I just want to give Dan and his staff a lot of credit because this is an area that we've done an extensive amount of work on over the last little while, in terms of really understanding the turnaround time. We've received a lot of feedback from a number of your colleagues, which has been very positive, and actually had some meetings where we've had some very good suggestions and some concerns that were brought to our attention. It's something that our housing authority managers track on a fairly rigorous basis to try to understand how we're doing, what we're doing, and how we can do better and, if we have a problem, that we can identify it early so we can deal with it and address it.

[10:30 a.m.]

It is an area that we've spent a lot of time talking about, that we've made improvements, we're looking to make more improvements and, more importantly, to understand exactly where we sit at any particular point in time. So how many units are vacant, where are they vacant, what's the plan to do the turnaround on that, there has been an extensive amount of work. The housing authority managers have done a lot of work and I'd like to thank you and your colleagues for the feedback that we've received, because that is very helpful for us to actually be able to go in and try to address that in a way that's meaningful and make some improvements.

MR. MACMASTER: Thank you. Who would be the largest partner the province would have as a landlord and about how many units would they have?

MR. TROKE: I'm sorry, the largest partner?

MR. MACMASTER: Yes, like if you were looking at a landlord who might have units, they might have them in various communities around the province. Who would that be and about how many units would they have that are subsidized by the province?

MR. TROKE: Right now the largest partners we would have would be non-profits and they are typically co-operatives, so we have some co-operatives that are in the range of over 100 units but in any given community, typically you would have a co-operative with somewhere between 20 to 40 units that a board would be managing. Those are typically your largest partners that we have relationships with. Once you get into a private sector arrangement, normally the way it has worked is that at any given time you might have 25 or 30 units that you might have a relationship with, but typically the non-profits have a much bigger relationship with the Department of Community Services than any other group.

MR. MACMASTER: Okay, thank you. What would be the - do you know maybe the largest private landlord, who that would be, offhand?

MR. TROKE: Truthfully, offhand, no I can't, but I can certainly get that information for you. I could say who our largest proponent is under some of the developments. Right at this moment some of the larger projects that are moving forward are actually with the non-profit community here in Halifax, so we have a number of very large projects that are moving forward. I certainly could get you who the largest private sector partner would be. Typically it would be an incorporated entity that would maybe have like 20 or 30 units.

MR. MACMASTER: Thank you. I understand there's some consolidation in the western end of the province and I think it basically spans the horseshoe from, say, Windsor to Chester. Would you be able to give some time frame around how that's developing and when it might be complete?

MS. FERGUSON: Yes, that was the amalgamation of three housing authorities - South Shore, Annapolis Valley and Tri-County - and that has already occurred. It was very successful and obviously a credit to all of the staff who are there and the leadership in the department, so that has already occurred. The manager for that housing authority has been hired and we're moving along with the transition and I'm really pleased to tell you that things are moving very well.

MR. MACMASTER: I'd like to ask a question about - would you be familiar with a group called Habitat for Humanity? Of course you are. This was a group that I had seen a presentation from. This was many months ago, but the presentation kind of stuck in my mind because I know they try to give people an opportunity to own, versus rent, a house. I know that might be good or bad, depending on the situation. Sometimes people have difficulty affording owning a home because there are all kinds of other costs with it, where it's much simpler to rent. Is there any notion the department would have towards an organization like that, that's trying to build homes for ownership for low-income Nova Scotians? Do you have sort of a take on that approach, relative to what you're doing, and can they work together?

MS. FERGUSON: Certainly in my time in the department we've been extensively involved with Habitat for Humanity and have been involved in a number of projects and are currently involved with them on two projects that are ongoing. They're a fabulous organization and we're really thrilled that we've been able to partner with them on a number of occasions and be involved with them, obviously, for the benefit of Nova Scotians who very much need the housing, so it's a wonderful experience for us.

MR. MACMASTER: Good, I'm glad to hear that. I often hear, and we often hear, the comments in the news and whatnot about a lack of affordable housing. I know I asked this question not that long ago at a Standing Committee on Community Services, I think it

was, and you provided an answer on that. Could you just sort of rehash some of that information you provided on that day?

MR. TROKE: Sure, happy to. The Affordable Housing Program and economic stimulus are kind of moving hand in hand right now, trying to expand the affordable housing units that are available. The key driver really is that an individual in a rental situation is three to four times as likely to be in what we would call core housing need. That means they are spending more than 30 per cent of their gross disposable income to pay the rent, so we've really placed the heavy emphasis on the development of new rentals throughout the province. We've done three requests for proposals and had approximately 100 groups that are interested in participating. We continue today to still receive proposals from every part of the province.

The real driver behind this is that we really target the lowest-income individuals and we also target trying to provide the most affordable rent possible, with a certain requirement for accessibility for those with disabilities because that is obviously a group within the Department of Community Services that we have heavy connectivity with.

At this point in time, through the Affordable Housing Program, I think we've developed something like 900 new rentals and we have about 1,400 that are at different stages of completion, and through the economic stimulus there are several hundred other units that are under construction right now. Over and above that, when you talk about affordable housing, we really focus on the fact that the province has about 12,000 rental units that it owns and operates and several thousand others through the co-op and non-profit portfolio.

We're housing somewhere just over 20,000 people and making sure that they have affordable accommodation. Through our work that's ongoing through the other programs, we're past 1,000 units that have been created and continue. We kind of seem to be in that ballpark where we're creating something like 150 new units each year; that seems to be what is coming through and capable of getting done, kind of in that timeline. As these agreements get renewed, we would hope to continue on with that progress throughout the province.

MR. MACMASTER: Okay, thank you. My last question, because I have just about one minute left, what trends do you see in rental rates around the province and the corresponding subsidies that would have to go along with those rates?

MR. TROKE: Certainly some of the highest rental tends to be here in the metro area, from a cost perspective. We have, as I mentioned earlier, a number of non-profits that have come forward, that we are going to be doing some projects here in metro that are really going to provide some additional opportunities. Through the economic stimulus right now we have three buildings under construction that the province will own. We just

completed a building recently that is being rented out that the province owns here, in the Halifax area. So that capacity is providing some opportunities.

We really have seen the private sector and non-profit groups that are interested in developing rentals in the small towns really take off. The communities that tend to have that population of anywhere between 5,000 and 10,000 people seem to really embrace the idea that we need to have more options for the people, and land tends to be a little more available, which makes it easier to have a development come together.

We have seen much more uptake and much more desire for uptake through the Affordable Housing Program in those areas, but we are kind of offsetting that by a lot of the development we are doing as a province is right here with regard to some bigger buildings, but also in the Sydney area as well we have a number of large projects that have been completed and underway .

So I think those are things that are going to be very positive for individuals who are on our wait lists.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Thank you, Mr. Troke. Mr. MacMaster, your time has expired.

We'll move to the next round, I believe, with Mr. MacKinnon. You've got about 11 minutes.

MR. CLARRIE MACKINNON: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. It's a pleasure to have our very capable guests here today from Community Services. An area that we haven't touched on and I think it's one that doesn't happen all that often because I believe that most people who are in rent supplement housing appreciate the opportunities that are being afforded to them, but what about the care of units? We know that inspections are done prior to occupancy and in the province's units we're also dealing with inspections annually. If there is a situation where someone or some family is doing structural damage to a unit, if, in fact, there is no lawn maintenance, if there are pieces of garbage and toys and other items strewn about a property, what kind of inspection is done in situations like that?

I'm not, by any means, advocating any kind of housekeeping rules, I'm the last person who would do that but there is a distraction from other units when someone doesn't take care and it makes for neighbours living in a less desirable area, so comments if you would.

MR. TROKE: Thank you. There are two sides to that coin. First is obviously if the tenant is experiencing issues with the landlord - for a rent supplement unit we do the inspections on an annual basis so if that rent supplement is renewed, we would be in kind of the second year, if you will, as well. Obviously the Residential Tenancies Act provides certain abilities for that tenant.

The reverse is also true. If you happen to have a circumstance where a person is not honouring the lease agreement that exists, whether it's as simple as paying their own portion of the rent to looking after the unit in an appropriate way, there is also an ability - I mean this is a three-way relationship through a rent supplement where there are expectations of the tenant, there are expectations of the landlord and then expectations of the department to ensure that the gap-fill on the rent is paid.

I guess really what I would focus on is that the Residential Tenancies Act is one of the key players in resolving any disputes either for the landlord or for the tenant, there are two sides to that relationship. Typically the other part is that when an individual goes into a unit if there are any challenges, the connection to the housing authority provides them another opportunity to obviously make a call. Either we can talk with the landlord, or if the landlord is having challenges, we can even talk to the tenant. Those are two things in that ongoing property management, if you will, is an aspect that our housing authorities are very active in because it's a role we play in units that we own and operate, so we wouldn't expect anybody else to be working under a different set of rules.

MR. MACKINNON: What is the department doing to protect vulnerable Nova Scotians from slum landlords? I think we all recognize the need for appropriate housing for Nova Scotians but the department has to have a role in protecting people who are too vulnerable to protect themselves.

MR. TROKE: We have had a lot of discussions from community members to even members of this House around different landlords with different circumstances. Our approach typically has been, and when we find that circumstances exist where conditions are challenging or deteriorating, the first approach we normally take is through some of our housing services programs. We have discussions with the landlord around opportunities to fix the units up without passing that rental increase on to the tenant.

Second, any time that an individual would come to the department with a challenge, we also have the ability to work with our colleagues at Service Nova Scotia and Municipal Relations around helping that individual understand their rights within the Residential Tenancies Act. I know that our colleagues at Service Nova Scotia and Municipal Relations have even held sessions for tenants collectively, maybe you have individuals within a particular building or within a particular community that are having challenges. They've had meetings with them to help them understand what their rights are but also to give them an opportunity to explore some options and, within the lease that they've signed, understanding that there are options as to how this can continue or not continue if this is not the right circumstance. Then obviously that's where we have an opportunity to help that individual find a safe, affordable place to live.

[10:45 a.m.]

MR. MACKINNON: The Auditor General identified a number of deficiencies, sort of, in that area or in that program. What are you doing to improve the Affordable Housing Program after the audit?

MR. TROKE: Well, some of the comments that the deputy made in her opening remarks, I think, are leading us to where we obviously are ensuring that each and every one of these recommendations is going to have action as we move forward. Many of them have already had action underway as we were in the process of doing the audit, so the policy updates should be in place within the next couple of months.

We've had an extensive review and rewrite of them and, as the deputy mentioned, we're down to the point where we have just a few decisions to make, that those will be place. Also with the changes that have happened to our housing authority structure, so that the three housing authorities being combined into one means that we have an opportunity to have - we have a director who is now responsible, a new director if you will, who is going to take, and has been told to take, each one of these recommendations and ensure that we work through, that they're all in place.

We have five housing authority directors now who collectively meet, who ensure that all of the new policies will be followed efficiently. We've sat down and talked about this entire list, to make sure that folks are aware of some of the opportunities that are there for us to maybe do our job better and provide better service.

MS. FERGUSON: If I may just add, we have a number, have had in the past, and I'm sure will continue to have, in terms of recommendations of the Auditor General. We take all of those extremely seriously in the department, so those recommendations are dealt with immediately. People are assigned responsibility for those recommendations across every program area. We track those recommendations on an ongoing basis. The senior team in the department is briefed on a regular basis around the progress of those recommendations and if we hit glitches, we deal with them, so it's something that we track on an ongoing basis as part of the regular work that we do in the department.

MR. MACKINNON: Going back to the wait list issue, we have situations certainly where the time on the list is the key factor but there are also many social needs, pressing needs that have to be weighed as well. I've always been an advocate of flexibility in programs, but it's hard to have a province-wide approach when you have flexibility from housing authority to housing authority.

I'm wondering, has there ever been a consideration for some kind of a point system, or is flexibility better? There have to be weighting criteria involved in some of the situations, looking at factors other than w-a-i-t.

MR. TROKE: The chronological wait list has really evolved over a period of a couple of decades. I know that there was a point in time when we had dozens of housing authorities in the province and there were different systems with different scoring systems. Really the emphasis has been placed on individuals basically moving ahead of that queue, based on emergency factors. So if we had an individual who was escaping domestic violence, or what have you, they would move ahead of that queue.

Really the chronological wait list has been one that it removes, if you will, the requirement of the intake worker to say, how do I weigh one item as being slightly more important than the other? However, that being said, certainly as part of our review we have looked at some of the wait list tools that are used not only across Canada, but we've looked at them around the world. Those are some of the things that we are obviously taking into consideration as part of our review. However, currently we are using the chronological list because it does allow for us, from a judgment perspective, you don't have to make a judgment. It's about kind of that first-in, first-out, with the exception of those emergency cases.

There has been some work done where point systems have happened in the past or worked in the past. We know there are some places throughout the world where they administer social housing using different systems. We look at those as part of our review but currently we are still using the chronological system.

MR. MACKINNON: What proof do you have that housing authorities are properly serving people in public housing in Nova Scotia? The audit makes it sound like there are out-dated policies and some staff are not following proper procedures. Could you comment on that?

MR. TROKE: I'd be happy to, thank you. First and foremost, the review that was done here took a look at a small number of files to see what they could find. Their comments were all very valid and we're going to make sure that each and every one of them is addressed.

I think from an operations perspective that we have continually looked to improve our service over time, continually looked to make sure that each tenant has an opportunity to provide and to get affordable housing. I can tell you that each one of these cases that is mentioned in here, I have followed up on each and every one of those cases. All of those individuals who are referenced in here certainly did obtain affordable housing, so it's not that an individual wasn't housed, or what have you, but certainly as part of our ongoing work is to make sure that what we're doing is efficient and as client-centred as possible.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Thank you, Mr. Troke. Mr. MacKinnon, I believe your time has expired. That concludes the formal part of this proceeding.

I'd like to thank the members from the Department of Community Services for being here and particularly, Ms. Ferguson, thank you, this might be one of your last acts. I know you said you would be here next week. On behalf of the Legislature I'd like to thank you for your service in the Department of Community Services, particularly in conducting this review that's ongoing. Best wishes and congratulations for the future, thank you.

Before we go, there are two formal requests for information. One was a request from the member for Preston for criteria needed for the construction of a seniors complex. I think that was a general request for criteria but I believe he also referred to Lake Echo in his question. The second request was from the member for Inverness, asking who the private landlord/partner in the provision of subsidized housing from the Department of Community Services was. We look forward to getting that response whenever it's available. With that, I thank you again.

We'll recess for about a minute to clear the room. We have a little bit of committee business, so maybe we'll resume again in a minute.

[10:53 a.m. The committee recessed.]

[10:55 a.m. The committee reconvened.]

MR. CHAIRMAN: Order, please. I call the committee back to order. We have just a few items on the agenda.

As I mentioned earlier, the committee will be meeting again next week to look at a chapter in the recent Auditor General's Report relating to Services for Persons with Disabilities.

Next week the Subcommittee on Agenda and Procedures will be meeting after that meeting and we will be looking at new topics, proposed topics from the three caucuses. If you do have suggestions, certainly bring them to your caucus reps and forward them to Mrs. Henry as soon as you can.

We've also received a letter from the Canadian Oil Heat Association. You have a copy of that response and you can decide how you would like to proceed with that.

Do we have any other business beyond that? Are there any other procedural questions? Mr. Colwell.

MR. COLWELL: This letter we received from the Canadian Oil Heat Association, would it be possible for us to talk to them and to see what their concerns are because they do raise some pretty serious issues in this letter? I wonder if it would be appropriate if we could have them come into this committee or into another committee of the Legislature and talk about the issues they've raised.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Yes, I think that might be a good issue to bring to the subcommittee and then we can have another go at it, if you'd like, in the subcommittee and after that maybe in the whole committee, if necessary.

MR. COLWELL: Sure, maybe I can make a suggestion that this be moved to the subcommittee for discussion at your next meeting, could I do that?

MR. CHAIRMAN: Yes, it's so moved. I don't think we need a formal motion; I think we consider any and all, they don't need to be formally moved, right? Okay, I'm sure the minutes will record that.

MR. COLWELL: Great, thank you.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Mr. Younger.

MR. YOUNGER: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Maybe just as a follow-up to the member for Preston, it might be worth, actually, before your subcommittee meeting, having maybe the clerk ask the department about it because all our constituency offices last week received a new brochure from the Department of Environment which actually claims that it was written in co-operation with the Canadian Oil Heat Association yet this letter says it's not, that they weren't involved. I don't think anybody is lying or anything, they're saying they weren't involved and the others are, so I think probably even just for the benefit of everybody to get to the bottom of the mis-communication.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Well, I think that was in the substance of Mr. Colwell's recommendation.

MR. YOUNGER: That's fine, in which case the Department of Environment should be involved since they just sent this to every one of us, that new brochure.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Mr. Epstein.

MR. EPSTEIN: Mr. Chairman, I'm wondering if you could remind the members of the committee what topics we have forthcoming. I see we have one for next week, but is there a set lineup at the moment? I'm afraid I don't recall.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Well, the only topic we have selected at the moment is services for people with disabilities but it is my understanding that the last time the Agenda and Procedures Subcommittee met we had agreed that we would follow through on the Auditor General's chapters, so it may well be subject to what this committee decides later. It may well be that the next few topics will come out of the most recent Auditor General's Report.

MR. EPSTEIN: Okay, thanks.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Well, if there's no other business to be conducted, I move that we adjourn.

AN HON. MEMBER: So moved.

[The committee adjourned at 10:59 a.m.]