

HANSARD

NOVA SCOTIA HOUSE OF ASSEMBLY

COMMITTEE

ON

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS

Wednesday, January 31, 2018

Legislative Chamber

**Transformation of the Employment Support
& Income Assistance System**

Printed and Published by Nova Scotia Hansard Reporting Services

Public Accounts Committee

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Mr. Gordon Wilson (Vice-Chairman)
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Mr. Hugh MacKay
Mr. Tim Houston
Hon. David Wilson
Ms. Lisa Roberts

[Hon. David Wilson was replaced by Ms. Susan Leblanc.]

In Attendance:

Ms. Kim Langille
Legislative Committee Clerk

Mr. Gordon Hebb,
Chief Legislative Counsel

Ms. Nicole Arsenault,
Assistant Clerk, Office of the Speaker

Ms. Karen Kinley,
Legislative Counsel

WITNESSES

Department of Community Services

Ms. Lynn Hartwell,
Deputy Minister

Mr. Brandon Grant,
Executive Director - Employment Support and Income Assistance

Ms. Vanessa Chouinard,
Executive Director, Policy and Innovation

Ms. Dale MacLennan,
Executive Director - Finance and Administration



House of Assembly
Nova Scotia

HALIFAX, WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 31, 2018

STANDING COMMITTEE ON PUBLIC ACCOUNTS

9:00 A.M.

CHAIRMAN

Mr. Allan MacMaster

VICE-CHAIRMAN

Mr. Gordon Wilson

MR. CHAIRMAN: I call this meeting of the Public Accounts Committee to order. We have with us today the Department of Community Services to discuss the transformation of the Employment Support and Income Assistance program.

I'd like to remind everyone to place their phones on silent. We'll start with introductions, beginning with Mr. MacKay.

[The committee members and witnesses introduced themselves.]

MR. CHAIRMAN: Ms. Hartwell, you may proceed with opening comments.

MS. LYNN HARTWELL: Mr. Chairman, as always, thank you very much for the opportunity to come and speak about the work that's being done at the Department of Community Services.

I am particularly pleased to have the opportunity to talk about our Employment Support and Income Assistance program and how we're transforming that program. As you know, it's a program that historically has been a program of last resort and we are looking to transform it so that it is a proactive support to Nova Scotia's most vulnerable people. Like everyone in this room, we want to build a stronger province where all Nova Scotians can grow and succeed. I'm going to share a little bit with you about what's driving our work and how our decision making begins to be informed by the people we serve.

In 2015, we began reaching out to Nova Scotians for their input on challenges that were faced with the ESIA program and what changes they thought were needed. We had 375 representatives from 128 organizations who responded to this request. They included strong advocacy voices, poverty networks, women's centres, and transition houses. We heard from educators, policy experts in various fields, medical practitioners and social workers. I would say that we also spent a fair bit of time talking to our own front-line staff about some of the challenges they were seeing and what they saw as challenges that clients were facing.

Senior officials from the department also held many meetings with advocates and organizations at their request. There has been a lot of frank talk about the need for fundamental changes to the system. Mr. Grant, sitting to my right, has often said he is willing to meet with anyone to talk about our Income Assistance program and I think has made himself available to do so. We want everyone to be involved in solutions.

As I mentioned earlier, most importantly, we did a reach-out to our clients - individuals who are receiving income assistance from the department. We had a series of 19 focus groups, or what are sometimes called First Voice sessions, across the province and we had 180 clients share their stories. Those focus groups were facilitated by community members, some service providers from across the province. We heard from them, as we met to sort of debrief after the sessions, that they found them incredibly impactful and found that clients were very brave and very strong in representing their views.

We also distributed surveys to clients who didn't want to participate in focus groups so everyone had an opportunity to be heard. We received more than 1,700 surveys, which we were really pleased with. Throughout the sessions, the meetings, and the surveys, we hear that the system is complex, the delivery of programs and services is inconsistent. We hear loud and clear from clients that their basic needs are not being met and that our policies actively discourage people from looking for work.

We also learned that most people who struggle to provide the food, the shelter, the transportation for themselves want to be self-sufficient. They want a chance to build a better life for themselves and their families. They want to have more control over their own lives and well-being and they want to be able to contribute to their community.

What we learned from the experts and the advocates and people living in need, as well as the experience of our own staff and our own experience as people who care passionately about this system - it caused us to revamp our entire system. The word "transformation" is truly the word, it is not just a label that we've put on this. We are looking to transform what we deliver and how we deliver it. We want to better meet the needs of clients; support as many as possible to become more independent, and to not need the system; and for those who will need the system, to thrive and have a respectful and good quality of life.

I would say the department very much shares the same sense of urgency that has been voiced loud and clear from our clients and advocates. We are committed to moving as quickly as we can to make some changes. I'm going to give you some examples. Clients told us that the program and system needed to be more trusting and less intrusive. As a result, one of the quick things we were able to do is we moved an additional 4,700 people to periodic income reporting, versus monthly income reporting. In doing that it reduced the administrative burden that clients faced, they did not have to report every month and re-establish their need.

The other thing we did is our clients can now receive two monthly payments, versus one monthly payment. A lot of clients moved to electronic funds transfer, again making it a bit easier. I would say from my own experience that most - not all - people who are receiving waged income receive it every two weeks or twice a month, so having that ability for clients to get money in the same way is a respectful way of doing it and allows people to do some better budgeting.

Clients told us that our programs and services need to be responsive to needs and be delivered more consistently. We know that the key to breaking the cycle of poverty is education and training for children and youth. Helping children get off to a fresh start is critical, so we've been very pleased to see that the province has expanded the Provincial Breakfast Program so children in need can come to school with a full belly. We're very supportive of the pre-Primary initiative because we believe there will be social, health and emotional benefits for children. It also provides families with the ability to save a little on child care, if that's possible for them.

We also introduced a change that we're very proud of, the new Educate to Work for dependants program. We really are leading the way in Canada with this program. For the first time dependants whose parents, whose family has been on income assistance are able to attend community college and we will pay the first year's tuition, as well as some other expenses. I'm happy to answer questions about that. I'm really pleased that we have 39 dependants of people on income assistance receiving this financial support right now, so a very strong first year for us.

We also fund some incredible organizations - whether that's ISANS, or Hope Blooms, CEED - to provide funding to them to work with youth in a more proactive way, to build confidence, explore career paths and gain valuable work experience.

One of the things again that we're very proud of is that we have started to extend career planning to children who are in the care of the minister. These are children who face incredible challenges. They have often experienced significant trauma and may not in the past have had the opportunity to start planning their future. For us, an ability to work with them and to show them that there's a better future available for them and support them is a significant thing, so we're really pleased with that.

[9:15 a.m.]

We also last year started an agricultural leadership project. We identified dependants of Employment Support and Income Assistance clients and youth who were in the care of the minister, and we invited them to participate with employers from the agricultural sector to do some leadership camps. We had sessions in both Truro and Kentville, I think, and they had a six-week work placement. For many of them it was their first work placement.

The employers were involved with the Nova Scotia Co-operative Council. The employers were thrilled, and again, it showed youth that there were opportunities for jobs in their communities but also just built the confidence and the connections so that they have a strong future that we can help plan for. We're very pleased with that and looking to expand that program.

Clients and others have told us about the barriers particularly facing post-secondary students, so we did increase support for the Career Seek program, which allows students to remain on income assistance while they attend university. Funding now covers the cost of one year's tuition, Internet, books, and student fees. It also provides funds to help with campus integration to lessen the stigma associated with being a student on income assistance.

I have to say that personally, I was keen that we do something that provides some flexibility. I thought of my own situation, attending university where I didn't know a soul. When I got there the first day, I realized that I didn't have the same backpack as anyone else. I didn't have the same gear. I just didn't know the norm. I felt I stood out. I come from a place of incredible privilege, so I can only imagine for children or young people who would come forward who would not have the same background of privilege necessarily and would also have the feeling of being already a bit stigmatized. The more that we can provide them with supports so that they can choose ways that they feel integrated and comfortable is really important.

We are also responding to the needs of foster families by helping them with financial costs. We are in the middle of launching a mentoring program for new foster parents and an on-call peer support program. I would be more than happy to answer questions about our foster parent program, some of the changes we made, and talk about the amazing difference that having strong foster families can make in the lives of young people.

We have increased funding for programs such as Parenting Journey, so vulnerable parents are engaged and supported in addressing issues in parenting, safety, basic needs, food and housing security, and physical and emotional well-being. When we talk about poverty and we talk about income security, the conversation very quickly goes to the fundamental things that I talked about. So when we are talking about improving our income

security program in Nova Scotia, we have to talk about those broader social programs that support families and children and communities.

Clients have told us consistently that a lack of transportation is a huge concern. Making medical appointments, meeting with caseworkers, getting to work and school, and even just being engaged in their community are challenges that our clients face every day. As people will know, we have been working with Halifax Regional Municipality on a private project that would see roughly 11,000 more ESIA clients in Halifax along with their spouses and, for the first time, their children, receive free bus passes - there is not an eligibility requirement in order to get a bus pass. Through this pilot, clients will no longer have to submit a list of medical appointments to justify the need for transportation support. I believe we're going to learn a lot from this pilot, and I'm hopeful that we'll learn things that we'll be able to apply across the province.

Clients told us that the ESIA program needed to provide sufficient supports to help meet basic needs. Several years ago, we had the \$20-a-month personal allowance increase. It was the largest in our history. We also doubled allowable assets from \$1,000 to \$2,000 for individuals and from \$2,000 to \$4,000 for families.

The thing that we're most excited about is the commitment that in 2019, we will be implementing a standard household rate that will result in increases in income assistance to all recipients in a sustainable way. It will mean an increase of 5 per cent of funding to people who are not able to attach to the labour market, who have no work obligation, and 2 per cent for all other ESIA clients. The standard household rate is built on the best principles of other income security models, including basic income. It builds a sustainable system that best supports the needs of all clients, reduces administration and encourages people to pursue paid employment. I'll talk a little bit about that wage retention change which I think will be the key, wherever it is possible, for being a strong path out of poverty.

When I say reduces administration, I want to make it clear that we are concerned about reducing the administrative burden on staff in all our programs. What is most exciting about this, though, is that it reduces the amount of paperwork that clients have to provide. It reduces the need for clients to over and over again have to demonstrate their need. That is one thing that clients and their advocates have told us sharply, that they want to be treated with respect and to not have to continually prove over and over again what it is that they need.

Clients told us they are nervous about securing employment as benefits decrease when their job earnings increase. Under our new wage retention structure, benefit payments will be reduced at a much slower rate. Payments will be more predictable for clients so they can work and earn income as they transition to independence and so will be able to really do what we've wanted to do for a long time, which is tell clients that the more you work, the more you are going to be able to keep. Again, I'm hoping that you'll ask me

some questions about it. We believe that for some clients it will be a significant amount of money in their pocket right away.

Government has also committed \$20 million over four years in a grant program to support action from all levels of government and communities to work together to reduce poverty in our province. The Building Vibrant Communities program was the first initiative. It was announced just a while ago and this year we are focusing on supporting initiatives from communities that deal with food security - so access to food - that support youth to become independent adults as they transition from youth into adulthood, and that help Nova Scotians access the transportation they need. We heard loud and clear from clients and their advocates that these were three of the areas that really needed the most urgent review.

The changes we've made and are making are rooted in the feedback we heard from clients, advocates and many others in the past years. We have done a significant amount of research and looked at best practice and promising practice from around the country and beyond. We continue to work with jurisdictions across Canada so that we are leveraging what they are trying, they are leveraging what we're trying, and that we're all moving forward to try to make a difference in addressing poverty and income security. We have sought and will continue to seek the advice of those who know first-hand what poverty does to people.

There is much left to do. I am confident that we are on the right path because it's a path that has been created by talking to the people we serve. My own personal view, having been around now for 20 years, we have been talking about poverty for a while and we continue to talk about the problem. I am confident we are making the first steps to address it in a more meaningful, systematic way.

With that, I'll look forward to your questions.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Thank you, Ms. Hartwell. We'll start with Mr. Houston of the PC caucus for 20 minutes.

MR. TIM HOUSTON: Thank you for those opening comments. You mentioned the focus groups and the 1,700 surveys that were completed. I wonder if you can put that 1,700 into perspective. In other words, how many Nova Scotians are on Employment Support and Income Assistance as we sit here right now?

MS. HARTWELL: I'll look up the exact number in a second but I would say right now that at the time we did the focus groups it was roughly between 26,000 and 27,000 individuals who were in income assistance. They would have dependants so there would be probably closer to 40,000 at the time. Right now, as of today, we have 25,784 people on income assistance.

MR. HOUSTON: So 25,000, and the focus groups were done in 2015?

MS. HARTWELL: That's right.

MR. HOUSTON: So it's about between 26,000 and 27,000. Are those apples to apples? Are those the same numbers?

MS. HARTWELL: Yes.

MR. HOUSTON: What does that long-term trend look like? What would it look like on a graph? Is it coming down?

MS. HARTWELL: It is coming down. Our caseload over the past five years has continued to trend down. We explore lots of reasons for that. Some of that relates to changing economic opportunities, some of it relates to successful interventions.

I would say they are not always tied. We've had some of the greatest success in communities where there have been some economic downturns so again, it's very complex. What we are noting, however, is the changing demographic of who is on income assistance. While overall our numbers have gone down, we have seen an increase, for example, in the number of younger single people who have come onto income assistance.

MR. HOUSTON: I did notice there was a downward trend in the funding for the program. Maybe that's because the number of recipients are going down. Do you have a per person funding number that you can kind of give us over a couple of years?

MS. HARTWELL: I will get that number. We can give you case averages. I would say that the program is an uncapped program in the sense that if someone is eligible, if they meet the eligibility requirements they receive the benefits. Right now the latest, as of our November 2017 report, the average cost per case is about \$763 per month. That would be reflective of the fact that the significant majority of clients who are on our caseloads are single people.

MR. HOUSTON: Do you have the breakdown of the 25,000, between families and single?

MS. HARTWELL: Yes, I do.

MR. HOUSTON: Maybe at the same time, the \$763, can you compare that back to 2015 as well?

MS. HARTWELL: As of December 2017, 73.3 per cent of our clients were single adults with no children; 17.2 per cent were single adults with children, so single parents;

5.1 per cent were two adults with no children, a couple; and 4.3 per cent were a couple with children.

When we compare that - we have a six-month comparator - I would say that the numbers have changed to slightly more single adults. I would say that the trend over the past five years is that that number of single has increased slightly every year, as a percentage.

MR. HOUSTON: And what's an adult, 18 and over?

MS. HARTWELL: It is 19-plus.

MR. HOUSTON: In terms of the numbers, before I move on, I'm sure you get a number of appeals. Do you have some statistics on how many appeals you get and how many are upheld or overturned?

MS. HARTWELL: Yes, I'll get you that number. We have a step before appeals so we have an administrative review. That's the first step. If a client is unhappy with a decision that's made, it goes to an administrative review where a supervisor from a different area, who has not supervised that case, will review it to ensure that there was compliance with policy. A number of matters are dealt with at administrative review. Then if it's not resolved there it goes to appeals.

Right now, the number of open appeals we have is 99 open appeals. I used to work in this division so my information may be dated although I don't think it has changed that much, which is that the vast majority, over 90 per cent of appeals, are upheld in that the decision is not changed. But as people know, we have had a number of cases that have gone on to judicial review.

MR. HOUSTON: Do you have any statistics that would indicate how often clients find employment and kind of come off, but then revert back on?

MS. HARTWELL: We do, we monitor that quite closely. We look at it, we call it reapplication. Our rate historically has been in any given month between 75 per cent and 80 per cent of people who apply for income assistance have been on income assistance before.

What our system needs to improve on, and that's part of our transformation, is reporting the outcomes associated with different interventions. Right now, if the caseworker puts it in, the system is able to identify that someone has left for employment. Often though, people may leave for other reasons. They may move out of province, they may enter into a relationship, there may be other things. Sometimes our stats aren't clear on that. Overall we know that the continuing reattachment continues to be an issue, there

is something in that cyclical dependency so that's why we're taking some of the steps that we're taking.

MR. HOUSTON: So 75 per cent to 80 per cent of the applications each month are reapplications?

MS. HARTWELL: People who have been on the system before.

MR. HOUSTON: So if you looked at the total population of 25,000, would you be able to say how many of those are kind of in that situation where they've had to reapply? I guess it would be a high number, wouldn't it?

MS. HARTWELL: I can tell you that in the month of November, which is our most recent reporting, it was 80 per cent in that month and that equals 599 people who had been on it before. I don't have a number that shows whether those people, if that's maybe the second or third time that people have cycled out, we don't have that depth of reporting at this point. I expect that if I talked to the caseworkers they'd be able to identify that there are some people - it takes two or three times.

Part of the reason why we are paying so much attention to that is we need to answer the question, what are the supports we are providing to people when they actually leave? Sometimes it's support to them and it's support to their employer. There may be mental health challenges, there could be other issues or significant barriers. We have had some great success with some employers. I won't name which ones but there have been some great employers who we've been able to have that ongoing coaching relationship and provide a support, so if someone starts to miss work or if it's clear that there may be some employment-related issues, rather than lay off someone or someone lose the opportunity, we actually connect that client with what they need, sometimes a former client with what they need, but also support the employer to get through it, so we're focusing on that as well.

MR. HOUSTON: I wonder, in some way they are maybe not prepared to leave, to begin with, I guess. That brings me to the clawback on people who are working, and when income starts to be clawed back. Have you done any studies on the optimum level of when the clawback should begin? It's one of the things I hear all the time - as soon as you try to get going and get going forward, they are clawing back, right?

Are you comfortable that the department is at the optimum clawback level right now?

MS. HARTWELL: No, we're not at the optimum level and we're planning on changing it. I will say this though before I talk about that: there are people who are receiving income assistance for whom it's not reasonable to expect they are going to be able to attach to the labour market. They are going to need longer-term support. So we are

trying to focus on both large segments, I guess; people who are able to attach to the labour market, helping them get the supports they need, the training, whatever it is they need so they can attach and then help them successfully maintain the job.

Then for the people that that is not likely going to be a source of income for them, that we increase their quality of life and their ability to be included in their community. We need to do both. If the answer to incenting people to leave income assistance was simply withholding benefits or anything like that, we would have a very different caseload. The reality is that people who are on our caseload now are there because they really have limited options and need support to make different choices or have different opportunities.

You are absolutely right about the wage incentive; we have been working on what a different wage retention policy could look like. Currently as you know, our situation is that people are able to keep the first \$150 that they earn and then anything after that they are only able to keep 30 per cent. Our intention is to change it to a wage retention policy so that people are able to keep the first \$250 that they earn and then anything they earn between \$250 and \$500, they get to keep 75 per cent of that, so 75 per cent versus 30 per cent. Then from \$500 to \$750, they are able to keep 50 per cent. Then from \$750 to \$1,000 they are able to keep 25 per cent.

What that will mean when we are able to act on that - right now we have the average amount of wages that people who are on income assistance and who are earning wages, the average amount of wages they earn is \$500. Once this wage incentive goes in for these folks, it will be several hundred dollars more in their pocket immediately. That's money that they have earned. The ability to have that in the economy is going to have a significant effect.

The numbers I used are for the majority of clients. There are clients who meet some policy eligibility and are considered to have a disability or have a barrier. They are actually going to be able to keep \$350. The numbers vary.

MR. HOUSTON: Is this a copy of a program somewhere else?

MS. HARTWELL: We have looked across the country. It will probably be the most leading, I would say, in terms of wage retention policies across the country. When we looked across, we saw that a small change was not going to be able to make a difference. People still would have that fear of trying and the possibility, in their mind, of losing Pharmacare and other benefits, that fear of taking a chance. We heard loud and clear from clients in the focus group, almost to a person, that they wanted to try, and they wanted to be employed, but they were fearful of what the implications would be if they failed. So we need to remove that. As I say, as we looked across the country . . .

MR. HOUSTON: When would these changes take place?

MS. HARTWELL: The plan now is that the standard household rate, which would include this wage retention change, is scheduled for the year 2019-20.

MR. HOUSTON: What's the hold-up?

MS. HARTWELL: The hold-up is really a practical one, which is that we are a big system, and we have hundreds of employees. Our current eligibility systems are calculated one way. In order for us to fully have a system in place that will be a reliable system - we don't want people to be calculating it on paper - we need a robust system, which we're building. And we need to train staff.

I would say that in addition to training staff on a new system, we're also engaging in conversations with our caseworkers about how this is signalling a bit of a change - one that we have been talking about for a couple of years, but we're now finally there - which is moving away from a needs-based assessment, where people have to demonstrate need over and over again.

For caseworkers who we have been asking to do that for the past 50 years, we're going to be asking them to take a slightly different approach with clients. They're going to be starting with an active offer of assistance. What do we need to make a difference in this person's life? The training and the conversation about that is going to take a little bit of time.

I can say if there is an opportunity to move faster on this, we absolutely will. We have to make sure the systems are set up.

MR. HOUSTON: How much does the department currently collect in terms of the clawbacks?

MS. HARTWELL: We don't necessarily calculate that way because we don't collect it back.

MR. HOUSTON: It's just not paid out to begin with.

MS. HARTWELL: It's just not paid out. We'll look and see if there's a number that we can provide that would be a rough indication of how much. But again, I can say that I think we have probably between 10 per cent and 17 per cent of clients who have employment income. So it's not a huge number in terms of percentage of our caseload. But again, the income that they're earning is not insignificant.

MR. HOUSTON: Okay, so the delay is really kind of the computer system?

MS. HARTWELL: The computer system would be part of it, but it's actually the people system that's going to take a while as well. We want to make sure that we're going

to get it right. It will be most effective - as I said earlier, we're trying to deal with two slightly overlapping but different populations.

As much as we want to move forward with the wage retention, I also want to move forward with enhanced adequacy for people who aren't able to work, so I would like to see those go hand in hand to the extent that we can. We're trying to build both at the same time.

MR. HOUSTON: In terms of the enhanced adequacy for those who can't work, what is the main change that people can expect there?

MS. HARTWELL: We want to see more money in people's pockets, so an increase in rates, and as we have talked about, at this point a 5 per cent increase is what we have costed into this . . .

MR. HOUSTON: That's 2019 as well, did you say?

MS. HARTWELL: Yes, that's 2019-20. But it's also the other things that we talked about - being able to provide a bus pass for example, in addition, will be a step forward. We're having conversations about looking at some of the other things that people often identify as special needs. We have done a fair bit of work identifying what our special needs are.

People won't be surprised to hear that the largest area is for either medical assistance, a special diet, or for telephones. We have been doing some work to see what we could do to provide benefits around telephones and other things. We're bringing those forward over the next year as well because the rate is one thing, the goal is to increase the rate to a point that it starts to better move us towards adequacy and also to have other benefits that are received outside of that rate, all with the end goal of allowing people to live with dignity and make some choices about what they're doing, where they're going and being able to contribute to their communities.

MR. HOUSTON: Can Nova Scotians expect some incremental changes or is it just in 2019 that there will be these different changes?

MS. HARTWELL: No, you can absolutely expect incremental changes. We have already started that - I would say the changes to Educate to Work and the changes to Career Seek, as well as some of the other administrative things that we have done. I mentioned in my opening statement when we are able to move forward - we have done so and will continue to do so. If there is an opportunity to clarify policy or if there's an opportunity to do something new, like the Atlantic Agricultural Leadership Program, we do have some additional funding aimed specifically at youth because we see that increasing youth demographic.

We are going to be continuing to introduce some new programming and supports not only to prevent youth from coming into the Income Assistance program, if possible, but also when we have young people who come on the system, to have early interventions that work for them so that's not becoming a longer dependency. We know that the longer people stay in our system, the harder it is to leave, so the more we can help people actually get off the system early, the better.

MR. HOUSTON: In terms of transitioning off, has the Department of Community Services ever been the first employer for somebody who has left the system?

MS. HARTWELL: Yes, I'm happy to say that we have. I would say that the Department of Community Services, and I know in housing as well - there have been opportunities to have people work, whether it's in our offices or whether it's in Housing Authorities. We've also funded organizations that are our service providers and they've hired. It's something that we're looking more at because I think in particular with youth, we fund a network of organizations and we ourselves have 70 locations across the province. In our summer employment and any kind of opportunities, we are looking to do that.

MR. HOUSTON: Okay, thank you, Mr. Chairman.

MR. CHAIRMAN: We'll now move to the NDP caucus and Ms. Roberts.

MS. LISA ROBERTS: I'm going to start by expressing my frustration that we are speaking in the future tense at this point. As the package showed, First Voice experiences were collected in 2015. They were presented in a report that was provided to us in 2016. They spoke about these issues and we're looking at 2019-20 and that's a really long time in people's lives, well actually in anyone's life that's a really long time. It's almost a whole childhood for people who have been talking about transformation.

Can I get a little bit more from you? I understand that it's a big system and that there's a lot of people and there's a different culture, but are there other constraints? What other constraints have caused the transformation to be - I think for people who are dependent currently on the system - really painfully slow?

MS. HARTWELL: I share your frustration that we cannot do things faster. I would say I am satisfied - sometimes reluctantly satisfied - that we can only move as fast as the system will allow us to move in terms of people's own readiness for change.

There has not been a huge resource restraint here. I would say that we've had resources for the past three years, starting four years now, to assist us with transformation. The reasons why people are on our system are multi-layered and complex, as you know, so we have not been able to, or I guess it would be unrealistic for us to expect that one or two policy changes would be able to make the kind of transformative change we're looking for.

[9:45 a.m.]

When we started this journey, we mapped out how long we thought it would take. I think even then we underestimated it. We thought probably about a five-year transformation period then. We're still pretty much within that. We'll probably end up at more like five and a half. But with the complexity of the system and the need to revisit fundamental values of why we're doing this and helping the system to shift, it has taken some time.

If I'm not being clear, I'll give you an example. Several years ago, I would say there was a real trend - trends come and go - sort of an employment first trend at the time. Our caseworkers work very hard to deliver services in a compassionate way within the boundaries that we set. At the time, the boundary really was to get as many people to work as possible, not because it was a sort of punishment, but the feeling was that that was the way that people would re-engage and maybe have better outcomes.

Of course, we know that it's not as simple as that. Having someone attach to the labour market might be the best thing for that person, but for other people, they are not ready to do that. It would actually cause harm. Or they would be better served doing post-secondary. So the subtlety of that, we have hundreds of staff around the province who are doing front-line casework with them to say, it's actually okay to make a different decision, to use your professional judgment and to deal with the client sitting across from you.

If a memo from me would have been enough, it would have been done. But people are trying very hard to manage within the systems that we currently have. Reworking that has taken a bit of time.

What I will say is that wherever possible, when we think we can do something faster, we are trying to do that. Like you, I sit in rooms with people who are experiencing poverty now, who have been experiencing it, and are exhausted by waiting for someone to hear what they have been saying for years and do something. I get it. We are absolutely committed to moving forward.

It's in part why we have taken the approach we have, which is to continue to move forward and not write another report and not start from another discussion paper on poverty. Having been around discussion of poverty through three different governments, I have been hearing the same thing from people. People have been very clear in their advocacy. We need to act and do something. Our focus right now is 100 per cent on moving those things forward. I wish it could go faster, I really do. But I know that we have staff moving very fast to go as fast as we can.

MS. ROBERTS: In December, 27 different groups, agencies, and individuals - including the College of Social Workers and First Voice groups - stated publicly that both the process and outcomes of transformation are far from adequate. They asked for income

assistance to be increased to address deep poverty now. Will there be an increase to the rates in the next budget, in the 2018-19 budget?

MS. HARTWELL: I don't know. I don't know what is in next year's budget. I'm not able to give a definite answer on that. What I can say is that we have, as always, looked at options to try to address income security from a number of angles, including a rate increase. We're making decisions on how we can put forward what options would best support people who are currently living in poverty. We're providing a range of options, so we'll see in the budget.

MS. ROBERTS: That same group also asked for the department to be more collaborative as they outlined in a document called the Community Agenda for Social Assistance Adequacy and Reform. Do you see ways for the department to be more collaborative as transformation continues?

MS. HARTWELL: The easy answer to that is yes, we always need to be more collaborative. We always need to find ways to be more open. I will say I was incredibly disheartened by the letter. Some of the organizations who had designed that letter had been part of meetings for months, so clearly they didn't feel that those meetings were giving them the level of collaboration that they were looking for.

As I said earlier, we have maintained that we will meet with anyone and will continue to do so. One of the other things asked was that we sort of take a pause and do more consultation. I'm not in support of that, I'm in support of having more action. We have every intention of doing another engagement series. We already had two with stakeholders and one with First Voice. Our intention is to do yet another one when we have more detail that we can share with people and say, how is this going to work, what do you think about this? We're not in any way closing doors on that.

Ultimately, the people who are engaged get to decide whether they feel that they've been engaged enough and ultimately we'll continue to meet. In addition, we had 120 organizations involved in consultation and we had some groups included that were involved in designing the consultation. So we'll just continue to work at it, committed to making it better.

MS. ROBERTS: Approximately a year ago, you told the Community Services Committee that to bring everyone on ESIA to the low income cut-off would cost \$143 million. When the 2019-20 budget comes and there's this change to the household rate, where will ESIA recipients be in relation to the low income cut-off?

MS. HARTWELL: I would say the answer to that is it will depend. Our focus has been, as I've mentioned, on the growing number of single individuals. Our hope is that we'll be able to raise the percentage of adequacy the most for single individuals, but our intention is that everyone will see a benefit.

Will it get everyone across a low income cut-off, for example? No, not in one fell swoop. The reality actually is that families with children are already at the low income cut-off, or in some cases above it. When you combine provincial and federal benefits together, you are not just looking at the income assistance system. So the gap that is the most worrying gap is that gap for single individuals and so they will not be pushed over the low income cut-off but will be increasing the adequacy, it is a really good first step.

MS. ROBERTS: We saw a recent decision by Justice Jollimore in which the minister's request to take a child into custody was denied. We know that in that case inadequate housing was talked about as a factor in the department's recommendation that the child come into the care of the minister. Does the department know what the average income level is of families whose children are taken into care?

MS. HARTWELL: We don't know the average income level. I was asked this question at Standing Committee on Community Services and at that time was able to confirm that we were not always privy to people's income level so there's that, but our assessment would be that we actually have children in care who come from all socio-economic levels. My understanding is that it is actually pretty evenly spread.

What I would like to say about that decision, as everyone knows, we are not able to talk about cases and in the matter of child welfare, we are really not even able to indicate whether a child is currently or has been in care. It's very challenging to be able to provide a fulsome response, for certain. When I think of what the social workers who work in child welfare around the province do, who have to make the determination of whether they're going to apprehend a child or not, they weigh a lot of factors and it is never taken lightly. They only make that decision when they believe that a child's safety and well-being is at stake, when there has been abuse or neglect.

The test for that is quite substantial in the legislation. Sometimes they have hours to make that decision - they weigh evidence, they can talk to colleagues, they can have that conversation with supervisors. Sometimes that decision is made at three o'clock in the morning while there are other very upsetting things going on. I am never in a situation to second-guess the judgment of those professionals in that situation.

What I would say, though, is we have checks and balances for a reason. We often have them confer with colleagues and maybe have a different point of view. They often have case conferences. They go before a court, and the court reviews and decides whether they agree or not.

In that decision that came out, I know there were staff around the province who - in some of the criticism of that - were assuming that they were making a decision lightly or that they would only ever look at whether someone was in poverty. That would not be the reality. I just want to say on the record, there are staff making incredibly difficult decisions and the fact that someone is living in a lower income would not be a determining

factor. It would be whether or not they believe, in their best judgment in that moment, that there's a child at risk.

MS. ROBERTS: We've been hearing some concerns recently from social workers about the adequacy of resources, human resources within the department and in wake of the changes to the Child and Family Services Act. What resources were added to the department to adjust to faster timelines that are required under that Act?

MS. HARTWELL: Thank you for that question, I'm glad you raised it. We have been hearing from social workers. As a matter of course we have sessions where we have senior staff. In the case of social workers it would be Leonard Doiron who is the executive director of that program, to go and hold sessions with front-line staff and with their supervisors to hear the impact on them. We also have feedback loops with of course supervisors and managers. Through that, in addition to more public venues, we're hearing that staff were feeling a bit overwhelmed.

Again I would say that given the nature of the work that many of them do that I just described, even a small change in a new form and a new way of recording things, which may give us really important information but is a burden on them - the tolerance for change is very low. Not change at a policy level - people go into that profession because they care deeply about children and they are ready to do whatever it takes - but in terms of a system.

We heard that and what we have been able to do is we've been able to reassign staff from other programs - vacancies I should say, from other programs - to create teams that will support the social work team on a temporary basis. We have what we call a floating team in the western region, with a supervisor and different front-line staff so that if an issue comes up or someone leaves and there's going to be a two-week delay before we fill it or anything like that, that the team is able to move in. We've been able to do that there.

We've created a similar team here in central. We have been meeting with supervisors, as well as their union, to share what we've been doing in terms of updates and changing around some of the workload, in addition to providing those additional resources to social work staff. We have a plan for 30 days, 60 days, 90 days and we're just about to start in the 60-day phase. So far we're getting very positive feedback from staff that it's making a difference.

MS. ROBERTS: Just to go back to my original question, was there a new allocation of FTEs? Could you put numbers to the support that were incorporated in the budget and that we'll see going forward in terms of resources?

MS. HARTWELL: I'm not able to talk about what's in the budget coming up or any allocation. We didn't request additional FTEs for this past piece of work. In retrospect, we may have underestimated the impact of change. What we believe is that once the change settles in, once we're able to have the systems in place that we need and questions are

answered, I'm pretty confident that the number of staff that will need to be added is probably minimal. We're really just in the process of assessing. There were no new FTEs allocated, but we were able to switch resources from other program areas so the program has seen additional FTEs added.

[10:00 a.m.]

MS. ROBERTS: My time is getting short and I also know that the disability community has been waiting in a process of transformation for as long as the Employment Support and Income Assistance program. I don't know where we are on the road map towards a community-based service model and reduced reliance on large facilities. I'm wondering if you can say what funds were allocated in this budget year to increase community residential capacity - so small options homes, and how many additional beds or spaces were created?

I'm going to throw a third question in, in case I run out of time. Where are we on the waiting list for the Disability Support Program? I have our most recent figures are 1,143 individuals waiting, so an update on all of that, please.

MS. HARTWELL: Thank you for the question. Overall I can say that we're continuing to move forward on the road map. If the Employment Support and Income Assistance program is undergoing a transformation, the Disability Support Program is undergoing a revolutionary transformation - if there's something bigger - because it's a fundamental shift from a reliance on larger facilities to community-based options, and it can only be done at the pace that people are ready for that to happen and that we have the support systems in place.

In 2016-17 we did have some funding to move 25 people - I think it was in 2016-17 - from larger facilities into community. It was roughly \$2 million for the 25 people. We have just completed an assessment of about half of the people who live in the larger facilities. By larger, I mean the regional rehabilitation centres and the adult residential centres. We have nine of those in the province. We had a pretty good handle on who might be ready and were pleasantly surprised that in the reassessment of some folks there were people who, with support, could live independently. Imagine - living in the highest level of care but with supports could live independently.

We were able to start some work to help those folks move, and it was an absolutely fascinating and challenging time because we learned about some of the challenges and the barriers. We had eleven people who were ready to move and when the time came, they just couldn't make that leap. They had lived in a larger facility for a long time, and I would say that in many cases their families were not comfortable. That taught us a lot about how we actually had to help people get ready to live in community and how we can transition. Again, the people in that group were people we had assessed as probably the greatest ability.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Order. I'm sorry, the time has expired. We'll move to the Liberal caucus and Ms. Lohnes-Croft.

MS. SUZANNE LOHNES-CROFT: It's pleasant that you are here today because as an MLA, one of the frequent requests are from people who are on income assistance or people looking for ways to find more resources. I must say that your department has been very helpful when we've reached out to them.

Sometimes we look at it in the form of currency as the way to help alleviate the present situation for individuals but I see it is spread out in many other areas and not necessarily always from your department; they come from various other departments and grant programs and whatnot. Keeping abreast of the new initiatives that are always coming out, not just with your department but others, that help people who are marginalized and on low-income assistance.

Being a rural MLA - here I am again, I really feel the poverty experience is different in rural Nova Scotia than it is in the urban, HRM. We hear a lot about what's happening in HRM, it's more in the news than in rural Nova Scotia. How is the experience different for someone living in poverty in rural Nova Scotia as compared to in the urban setting?

MS. HARTWELL: You're absolutely right - it is different. It is different from an urban and rural setting, and I would say it's also different in suburban communities that ring around some urban centres. I would say the largest thing that makes it different is the ability to access services and support; there just may not be the same variety. As we have talked about earlier, transportation remains a significant issue and one that absolutely has to have a different solution than one that would work in urban or in suburban areas. The experience of poverty is different. Again, in Nova Scotia, we do have poverty across the province. It's just experienced differently.

One of the reasons why we're taking the approach we are with poverty and the creation of a blueprint by the end of our work as opposed to starting with a document and then setting everyone to work based on that is that we need to know what will work in different communities. The answer to that is in the communities themselves. It's not here in my department or in any one place. We know that what will work in Halifax is not likely to work in Digby Neck.

I mentioned the Building Vibrant Communities fund earlier. That is a program that will ask communities, what will work for you? As I said, we have focused on three areas to start - food security, youth transitioning into adulthood, and transportation. We have already started receiving grant applications. Our hope is that we will get to see some really innovative and interesting ideas. Then we will be able to evaluate them - we plan on using a consistent evaluation method - to see what works where and then to see where we can scale it and build it and try it in different places.

The other thing that we're doing as part of the poverty blueprint is creating innovation labs. That sounds like a little trendy thing, and I don't love the language for that reason, but it really is an opportunity to bring together some disparate views. People have expertise in different areas. We would have people from the academic world, people who have front-line advocacy experience, people who have lived experience and are living in poverty, service providers, other government departments possibly, municipalities, et cetera. We would bring folks together and actually unleash a problem on them and say, if you could solve this, what would you do?

Of the two that we're hoping to do for this coming year, one is on food security and that will absolutely have to have a rural lens because, again, access to affordable food is connected with transportation and other things. That will be an opportunity to really understand the differences between rural and urban there. Again, we're not starting this work. There are some great researchers in this province and people who have already been working on this issue. Think of some mobile food vans and other things. People are doing interesting work. It's building on that.

The second topic is focusing on transportation, particularly community-based transportation in Cape Breton. There are some groups there that have put forward some ideas, so that will be our next innovation lab. Our hope is that by learning what will work in rural Cape Breton, we'll be able to then take that and see whether that could work in rural areas across the province.

It's just a different approach. I would say that by and large, the response has been positive to this approach. People like the idea of community-based solutions.

There's always the worry about starting something - will we be able to continue it, and so on. That's why we're building a blueprint. The idea is that this isn't the start. We're not ending in four years. In four years, we're going to be able to say, this is the best way that we believe that we as Nova Scotia can address poverty in our province. We're really excited about that work.

MS. LOHNES-CROFT: Are you getting a lot of advocacy voices from rural Nova Scotia? You talked earlier about collaborative work with stakeholders. Is there a strong voice for rural Nova Scotia?

MS. HARTWELL: There is a very strong voice from rural Nova Scotia. There are some organizations that have done tremendous advocacy for a long time. Women's centres would be a good example. There are also Boys and Girls Clubs and others who have been able to bring the experience of poverty in their communities and have participated fully in our conversations.

We've also taken advantage of organizations that have their own - we've kind of crashed their gatherings, in a sense. Mr. Grant here recently attended - it's probably several

months ago now - a gathering of food banks from across the province to hear their perspectives and how it impacts on our system and to be able to provide a bit of conversation back and forth.

My sense is that rural Nova Scotia is very aptly represented by the advocacy voices and the onus is on us again to continue to meet with them and to hear that voice.

MS. LOHNES-CROFT: Maybe, Mr. Grant, you could expand on your food bank. I mean, it's a result of food security or lack of security. In rural Nova Scotia one of the things I hear is transportation to the food bank. There isn't much money in people's pockets to pay for a taxi. Finding a taxi in rural Nova Scotia can be a challenge, most are already pre-booked. What are some of the challenges you heard about food banks in rural Nova Scotia?

MR. BRANDON GRANT: Certainly over the last two years since I've been in the position, I've heard from hundreds of stakeholder advocacy groups, members from community organizations that have spoken to a number of challenges in rural Nova Scotia. Certainly when I attended the session, loud and clear, it was very clear that transportation is number one on people's minds, that there needs to be more work done around establishing rural transportation networks so that clients can not only access food banks but also one of the key goals of ESIA transformation is social inclusion and quality of life.

We want to ensure that our program is supportive of people participating fully in their community, having the opportunities to volunteer, to be able to go to the grocery store, to be able to meet with friends. We want to build those networks, work with community service providers, advocacy groups in rural Nova Scotia so we can find solutions that make sense for the challenges they face that are unique to the rural part of our province.

MS. LOHNES-CROFT: I think they get to know their clients a little better. I know there was a situation in my local food bank where someone didn't show up for a month so volunteers checked in and found out that the person was undergoing cancer treatment and was just too weak to come to the food bank so the volunteers themselves organized so they would take food to this client. I don't know if that would happen in an urban setting so much as it would in rural Nova Scotia; we tend to know people a little better.

I want to move on to the transformation and how it focuses on helping clients become more independent and build their life skills like budgeting and whatnot. I was really happy to hear about the payment system changing from one time a month to two times a month. I can give an example that I've heard a lot just this past month, in January a lot of low-income recipients or even people on social security get early payment in December, so waiting for that cheque in January is daunting. I know in my office we've gone around and tried to find food for people and whatnot because getting that cheque once a month, especially that January one, is really a long wait for people. Can you clarify some of the things that with the transformation will help ease people?

MS. HARTWELL: I agree and this may be an opportunity to ask you, as MLAs, if you have clients who are coming into your constituency and who haven't taken advantage of moving to twice a month rather than once a month, I think it's worth asking the question. We certainly have made the offer but people may not have taken us up on it, so that would be . . .

[10:15 a.m.]

MS. LOHNES-CROFT: Is it only electronically?

MS. HARTWELL: Yes, if you're getting it by cheque we are only able to do that once a month. I would say that we are actively trying to move as many people as possible to electronic funds transfer. When there was a possible labour disruption in Canada Post a while ago, the plans to have a backup plan was challenging for people - the same things we've talked about for transportation. So the more we can have people getting it in their bank account directly, the better. I think the federal government is going there anyway in terms of federal benefits. That would be another great thing to ask your constituents.

Sorry, now I've forgotten the question. I was so excited about electronic funds transfer.

MS. LOHNES-CROFT: In the transformation, what is there to help people with their life skills, to better their lives, build self-esteem and independence?

MS. HARTWELL: Yes, thank you for the reminder. I'm actually really hopeful that, in some of the Building Vibrant Communities grants, we will have communities come forward looking to do some skill-building things for people who are on income assistance. We have had some conversation with some great organizations.

The one that comes to mind is Junior Achievement. They have been doing some really strong financial literacy work with young people. They have a program called #Adulting, which sounds really trendy and fun, I guess, if you're old. They have been doing really interesting work with young people, including young people whose families may be income assistance recipients. They have been doing it across all socio-economic spectrums.

The more that we can partner with organizations like that that have a deep reach with community - there are other strong community groups that are doing it. I'm thinking of the MacPhee Centre for Creative Learning that has a whole piece on building skills and resiliency in young people. The more that we can support community groups to do that - we have received additional funding last year, and our hope is to continue to build, as I say, a real focus on youth programming for early intervention and prevention for young people. That could include organizations that are trying to build those life skills.

The other thing I will say is, we have received additional funding to support what we call adult service centres. They have a particular focus on clients who have a disability. They often run vocational and employment programs but also recreational and inclusion programming. This budget year, we have asked those organizations - I think it's \$1 million in additional funding - what could you do to increase the number of spots to increase your ability to serve young people who have maybe a greater depth of challenge than you have served in the past?

What we know to be true - and we have certainly been working with the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development on this - is that for young people who are getting to be 19 or 20, they're remaining in the school system because it's a strong form of inclusion for them. We need to make sure that when they are graduating, there is some place for them to graduate into. For many, it would be graduating to life skills supports so that they can enter into the world of employment and adulthood and all those things. For others, it may be a social inclusion model.

We are certainly having conversations about how we can strengthen the community capacity to have young people be able to enter into adulthood when they graduate, like we want all of our children to. It's just that when children have a deeper level of challenge, it sometimes means they stay in the school system because they have nowhere else to go. So that's a big piece of work for us as well.

MS. LOHNES-CROFT: I think financial literacy crosses all economic levels.

MS. HARTWELL: Absolutely.

MS. LOHNES-CROFT: We just had Family Literacy Day. Maybe we need a financial literacy day to recognize and show people ways of developing that. It's so essential to financial success for people and to be independent.

Also, I would like to have you explain a little bit more about the new wage incentive and how it will work because it will transition slowly, but it's coming, I understand. I sometimes don't grasp the percentages of how it flows.

MS. HARTWELL: I'll go through the percentages, and then I'll see if Brandon wants to add any detail. The reason why it's so compelling for me is that it allows people to keep the majority of what they earn, with some levels.

If I can do the rough math, I will. If you're someone who currently is earning the average, which is \$500 a month, the average that clients who are in our system are earning, right now you keep \$150, and then 30 per cent of the \$350 - I can't believe my team is not helping me with math - so roughly \$125. So you've earned that money and yet you don't keep that; you don't see it because your benefit is capped.

After we're able to do this, that same person will receive \$250 and then keep it, no issue. The amount from \$250 to \$500, they're going to keep 75 per cent of that. This is rough math in my head. That will be roughly \$200 more a month in their pocket.

In terms of the pathway out of poverty, that is the start of a really good one. If they're able to move from \$500 to \$600 to \$700 a month, up to \$1,000, they are still going to see the benefit of that.

There was an earlier question about if we looked at what was the best practice. I would say that we've been talking about this with colleagues. I recently had deputy ministers from across the country here in Halifax in November. They are looking to see what we're doing here because all jurisdictions are struggling with this. I would say there was a fair bit of excitement that we're going to try this and then see how it works.

We have done an exhaustive number of models on if we increased it by this amount, what would happen? If we did this amount, what would happen? What we believe is that if we have just a very modest number of people increase the number of hours they are able to work, I think 1 per cent of our caseload, that would still see millions of dollars more in people's pockets. If we are able to support a higher number of people, maybe 3 per cent of people, not only would there be more money in their pockets but the cost to our system would be less. That would allow us to then reinvest that money somewhere else.

Again, I'll turn it over to Brandon if there's anything you wanted to add. I think the opportunity is here, we're being a little bit innovative and taking a bit of a jump but it's a really exciting opportunity. Do you have anything to add?

MR. CHAIRMAN: Mr. Grant.

MR. GRANT: The only thing I would add to the deputy's comments is that the changes in the wage incentive are a direct result of conversations we've had with our First Voice clients during the focus groups. Clients have expressed that the current incentive isn't much of an incentive at all. We want to break that cycle, break into the amount of clients that we have who are reporting incomes. It's about 11 per cent now. As the deputy said, if we can increase the amount of clients who are participating in the labour market, we can see millions of dollars of new adequacy in clients' pockets. Money in their pockets that will help address basic needs.

When we've talked to our colleagues across the country they have various different wage incentive structures in place but they are pretty much the same, from the standpoint that there is an amount and a very steep climb-off. In the case of Nova Scotia, within our current system it's 70 per cent. So that steep climb-down has been a disincentive for clients for many years that we've done through analysis.

We want to create a structure that as you earn more income over time and as you build confidence, to start with a part-time job and maybe as you see the economic benefit of working, that you'll have the confidence to build more hours and potentially move towards full-time employment. It's a better approach that we feel will be a significant transformational change, given that the wage incentive structure now will allow clients to keep more money in their pockets and see the tangible benefit from employment over time.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Order, I'm sorry, time has expired. I let it go over a little bit there. We'll move back to the PC caucus. Mr. Houston, you have 10 minutes.

MR. HOUSTON: In terms of the wage incentive, when the change is implemented in 2019, I guess, there will be different tiers and it will kind of step down. I did do some quick math - my colleague did some quick math on the 75 per cent of the next bracket and 50. It would appear that if somebody were to make \$1,000 that they would keep \$630 of that, 63 per cent. So why not just say that? Instead of having all the tiers and stuff, why don't you say that on the \$1,000 you keep 63 per cent? It would be very simple, people would understand, and that's probably a level that they could kind of really improve their life and move forward.

[10:30 a.m.]

I guess the question is, we're improving the system, I say that for sure, but are we adding a level of complication that is really probably not necessary?

MS. HARTWELL: Again, we've run models on all of these things and I would say that at this point I guess there's two pieces. We're trying to be innovative, we don't actually know what will and what will not - I hate using the word "incentive", I'm trying not to use it because people want to work, people want to contribute. They don't need to be incented to do so, but we don't actually know what the level is or the tipping point or the threshold, I guess, that would have someone choose to work when they haven't up until now.

I'll say that if you are someone who is on the system as a single person now, we've discussed about how far people are below the low-income cut-off, if that level hasn't incented employment now I'm not sure what the incentive will be.

MR. HOUSTON: I guess from my perspective, I think I'd think about it a little differently. Incent or not incent might be part of it.

I'm more concerned with people not being properly prepared. We're seeing a big reapplication rate. Maybe they're just kind of getting there but they're not really ready. That's why I just leave that with you in the interest of time. I think if somebody has a job and is working and can keep more of that money, incentive might be part of it but I'm thinking that the other side is preparation, so they are getting a few dollars saved or they're

doing something because otherwise, it is a trap. I just worry about a level of complication there that is maybe not necessary, but run the models and think about it.

I did want to talk about access to caseworkers; it is something I hear from people. I actually heard about it this morning, the difficulty in accessing a caseworker and the continuity of the caseworker. The load per caseworker - is their caseload higher now that it was, say, two years ago?

MS. HARTWELL: I'm going to assume you're talking about Employment Support and Income Assistance.

MR. HOUSTON: Yes.

MS. HARTWELL: The average number for income assistance caseworkers is 139. Because our caseload has been declining, that would be on the lower end. Many of those clients, of course, are not in active touch with their caseworker and there would be some folks in there who are in crisis.

We vary caseload depending on the nature of the clients. For example, in Halifax where we have some folks who have a highly transient caseload, they have a caseload of six because they have people who are in crisis and they are constantly . . .

MR. HOUSTON: Is there much movement of the case, like do the caseworkers move around? I guess what I'd be curious to know is, how many cases does a caseworker have where they have never actually spoken to the person? That would be an indication that they are shifting around. Would that be something you would be able to monitor?

MS. HARTWELL: I wouldn't be able to tell you today, but I would say we should have no cases where a caseworker hasn't spoken to a client.

MR. HOUSTON: I would agree, but I don't think that is the case.

MS. HARTWELL: Right. I would say that we have, as you can imagine, a fair bit of turnover in our system. These are hard jobs and are often very emotionally draining so we have a fair bit of staff turnover. I would say that currently we have an expression of interest - you have probably heard a bit about it - where it allows for greater mobility of staff to move if they are in the same classification, so we actually have a lot of movement. It is in both rural and urban. In rural we have people coming in at entry level and then they want to move to a different place and they move around.

MR. HOUSTON: That's not good for the people, right?

MS. HARTWELL: No. We have to do everything we can to make sure staff are happy and prevent them moving, except when they want to move because it's their career.

I guess two important things, although there will be times our system may classify someone as being without a caseworker, it means they are without a permanent caseworker.

[10:30 a.m.]

MR. HOUSTON: How many people would be in the system who would have that classification?

MS. HARTWELL: At any given time, because we would have a vacancy, there could be 1,000 people who would be without a caseworker in the system. It is a misnomer and it is actually misleading because not only is there assignment of a temporary caseworker, we introduced a telephone system where any client who calls will get a caseworker. That caseworker is empowered to make decisions and do things on behalf of that client, so there shouldn't be a situation where someone can't get hold of a caseworker. They might not be able to get hold of that person that day but our whole system right now, we are averaging that more than 75 per cent of the calls are able to be resolved by that caseworker at that time, so we've changed that.

It's one of the things where it sounds - it actually gives people a bit of fear that they can't get hold of a caseworker. We need to get the message out that you can and if you call, a person will answer your call.

MR. HOUSTON: In terms of the supports available to kind of help people sometimes, I hear a lot about, I'd like to go take a course but I can't, and these types of things. I do want to talk about that but first I want to ask if medical marijuana is going to be something that would be supported? Would that be something that people could get financial support for?

MS. HARTWELL: If medical marijuana is added to the formulary, yes. We fund drugs that are on the formulary.

MR. HOUSTON: Do you have any statistic on how many people would be wanting to take a course or further their education and (a) receive funding for that, or (b) are rejected?

MS. HARTWELL: I can more easily tell you about the people who have been approved and I'll get that chart in front of me again to talk a bit about that. Our approach right now is that if there are people who want to take a course and if that course is something like a \$50,000 course in Houston, we might not be able to support it. If there's a comparable course here in Nova Scotia and it's part of their plan, we will support that.

We currently have 15 people in post-secondary in this year. Five years ago, we had seven and then one year we had three, so getting to 15, we're happy with that. In the Educate to Work, which is the community college . . .

MR. HOUSTON: That's 15 out of 25,000?

MS. HARTWELL: Yes.

MR. HOUSTON: That seems like an extraordinarily low number to me.

MS. HARTWELL: Yes, it is very low.

MR. HOUSTON: Especially when you indicated that a lot of the recipients - 73 per cent, I think - were single adults.

MS. HARTWELL: What you have to remember is that the people who are on income assistance - of course all the diversity, people from every walk of life - lots of people have some post-secondary so not a generalization. In order to be on income assistance, to have that as your main support, you have to have things going on in your life that would bring you to that. It is not something that people are aspiring to.

I would say there are people who are capable, absolutely. There are way more people who are capable of doing post-secondary. Our job is to find them, support them, and fund that. But there are a lot of people . . .

MR. HOUSTON: That would mean the caseworker actively encouraging somebody - hey, we can do this. My sense is that it's not working. At the moment, it's more of no, you can't, we can't do that, as opposed to hey, here's what we can do.

MS. HARTWELL: When the numbers started to get really low, we did do a blitz with caseworkers to say, we want you to go deep in your caseload, we want you to look and see who has expressed an interest; who has some credits, for example, that they may just need to build on. That's really what has driven the number up to the extent that it is.

We're going to continue to push at that. It's part of the larger cultural transformation that I was sharing with your colleague, which is we have to move from a system where we're the last resort - people are here only because they have no other choice - to a system that is actually supporting people to make different choices.

My hope is that that number would go up but I wouldn't want to send a false sense that we have people who are dealing with really challenging issues who are on our caseload and for them the journey to post-secondary may be possible but it may not be easy.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Order, time has expired. We'll move to the NDP caucus and Ms. Leblanc.

MS. SUSAN LEBLANC: I want to ask about different types of income that are exempt from being clawed back. We know that income assistance recipients are able to keep some types of income and not other types of income.

In 2015, the B.C. Government ended the practice of clawing back child support payments from people on income assistance, and last year, the Ontario Government did the same. We know that ending the clawback here in Nova Scotia would put an average of \$2,000 annually in the pockets of families that are in this situation. We also know that the Premier has come out on the record to say that the practice of clawing back child support payments is unfair.

My big question is, will we see the end of the clawback of child support payments in transformation?

MS. HARTWELL: I'm not able to confirm one way or the other. I don't know. What I can tell you is that we have spent the last several months examining the issue, and we have put forward recommendations. We'll probably get some direction on that shortly. The average support payment for people currently in our system is \$275 a month. So if that was allowed to be flowed through, that would be a significant impact on those families. We're actively looking at it.

MS. LEBLANC: When you say that you can't speak about what exactly is going to happen, but you have put forward recommendations, have you recommended that the clawback be ended?

MS. HARTWELL: I would say we have made a range of recommendations, again, depending on what the object is that we're trying to achieve. I say that, as I have said several times, the people who are experiencing the greatest depth of poverty on our caseload are not people with children, the poorest of the poor. We have put forward that if we were to focus on the people who are living in the greatest depth of poverty, here are some interventions that would make a difference. If you want to focus on families and try to end that cycle of poverty, here are some pieces, and an exemption would be some of the options we have put forward.

MS. LEBLANC: I hear loud and clear that those who are facing the greatest poverty are not families. Part of that is the federal Child Tax Benefit, of course. I see all sorts, all different makeups of people who are on income assistance coming into my office all the time. One of the biggest challenges that all of them face, no matter if they're families or not, is the cost of housing.

I just want to look at a couple of numbers. Our research shows that the average market rent for a one-bedroom apartment in Halifax is \$845. We know that for a family, the housing allowance ranges from \$535 and then it depends on how many children, et cetera. But it doesn't really get near that amount. In Dartmouth North, nobody can find an

apartment for \$535. I spoke to one gentleman the other day who lives in a rooming house in Halifax, and his rent is \$535. I'm just wondering, what does the department do when someone can't find shelter in their allowable amount?

MS. HARTWELL: There are a number of things. I agree that it is a challenge. Historically, when there has been an increase in shelter, rents have been increased that line up with that, so it's a challenging lever to manoeuvre. We continue to try to address our public housing wait-list. For people who are eligible for that, we have reduced the wait-list by I think 20 per cent over the last two years, so we'll continue to work on that.

We have also increased the number of rent supplements, which is certainly a strong part of a solution but not the whole solution. We have changed some of the rules around how we incent developers to build affordable housing. We recently increased the amount that they can claim as a per-door cost, it's now up to \$50,000 per door, in the hope that they will build more affordable housing. Those are longer-term solutions.

When there's someone who comes with an immediate challenge that they're unable to find it, we do fund housing support workers who will work with people to try to find a location; again, fully cognizant that there aren't always easy solutions. But there are also situations where we provide funding more than the shelter amount that we normally fund. So we would have a number of clients who would be in that situation where they are receiving a higher amount. Sometimes that is sustainable, and sometimes it's not, and we would ask the client to continue to work with a housing support worker to find another alternative. Is there anything you would like to add?

MR. CHAIRMAN: Mr. Grant.

MR. GRANT: What I would say is the caseworker should be working with the client to talk about housing challenges, to look at whether or not there's resources available, whether or not someone's rent is above scale to what we would recommend. As the deputy said, there's a number of programs that the department funds to help support people through rent supplements that help ensure that clients have the housing they need.

MS. LEBLANC: I would say that I have a number of constituents who have come into my office lately, clients of the system who have been told that this is their housing allowance - these are single mothers with several children. They do all the work to find an apartment and they're told they're not going to be funded. I find it very hard to hear.

I'm wondering how much the shelter allowance has increased since 2014. Can you talk about that for a second, and how much you expect it to increase next year?

MS. HARTWELL: The shelter allowance hasn't increased since 2014. In fact, it hasn't increased for significantly longer than that, in part because of the issue that I shared that at this point we have not been able to see a shelter allowance increase that has not been

almost immediately matched with a rent increase, so that people are not getting better quality housing from additional money.

MS. LEBLANC: Then we should have rent control in this province. Excuse me for interrupting.

MS. HARTWELL: I would say that part of the standard household rate - the reason why I'm happy with that is it does away with the personal allowance and shelter; it will be one amount. Again, people can choose to live where they want and use as much of that amount or as little. If we increase the adequacy that that amount could be added to the person's ability to purchase housing, so that for me the go-forward is to not have a stand-alone housing allowance that when we tip, we're just simply increasing the amount of rent. It's a larger picture.

MS. LEBLANC: We talked about this in committee one time but I just want to hear about this again. We know or we've heard that DCS doesn't have any official tracking system to track race and gender of clients. I understand that it may be entered into the narrative details that are written down in reports, but it's not tracked in a systemic way.

I'm wondering how the department can be sure that services and the care that you provide are culturally appropriate or be aware of the ways that systemic racism is affecting policies that are being implemented by your department.

MS. HARTWELL: Thank you for that question. I would say that we do track - probably track gender more than we track race. Our systems as part of our transformation are looking at being overhauled and we absolutely are looking at the reporting requirements, where do we need to get good information.

What I will say about cultural competency in the department is, it's something we're looking at and we're looking at it actually with other departments. As you probably know, the deputy ministers have recently formed a committee or a group to focus really strongly on the issues facing the African Nova Scotian community. I would say that the issue there is not just our competency in delivering services but how the people who deliver the services can also be from that community. I think as employers, there are things that we can do there.

The challenge - we certainly have programming that is specific to varying cultures or groups. I think of our Parenting Journey program where we recently introduced programming. I say "we" - we facilitated it, but the community itself designed for the African Nova Scotian community. They designed their own Parenting Journey program with support, so we have that.

[10:45 a.m.]

We also work very closely with the Mi'kmaw Family and Children's Services to improve our cultural competency and to support them to deliver services - the services they deliver - and to supplement their ability to provide preventive services.

It is absolutely a work in progress and we continue to have to do better. Certainly, part of our plan is transformation, that we not only have staff that are able to deliver the services in a culturally competent way but that the entire policy is going through a lens, really a diversity lens from its inception, including - again, I have a bit of a fixation on having more diversity.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Order, time has expired. We'll move to the Liberal caucus and Mr. Gordon Wilson.

MR. GORDON WILSON: Thank you, Ms. Hartwell. I think it has been educational at the very least to what is going on and all the moving parts.

Before I start, I think one thing that wasn't mentioned that I'd like to pass on, on behalf of not only my colleagues and my caucus but also our other MLAs who are here, is to thank the staff who are out there doing the work that they do in one of the most challenging environments, making some of the hardest decisions. On behalf of all of us, I really do sincerely want to thank them for that. Not only that, but it's never easy to go through transformational change. It is one of the most challenging things in any institution, let alone government.

I'd be curious to know, when was the last time that the Province of Nova Scotia has entered into any legislative or any major changes, as far as programming, that you would note in our history?

MS. HARTWELL: I've characterized what we're trying to do, which is transforming all our programs at the same time in a client-centred, holistic way. It probably hasn't happened since the inception of the Canada Assistance Plan, which is maybe 50 years ago.

There have been legislative changes in particular programs. I think around the year 2000 would have been the last time that the Employment Support and Income Assistance program was looked at. Before the changes to the Children and Family Services Act, which was last year, that probably hadn't been looked at for 20 years. I would say the Disability Support Program has not fundamentally changed; that legislation has not fundamentally changed for decades.

The fact that we're trying to move all these big systems at once is challenging, but it actually speaks to the fact that the clients who we serve are whole people and they

actually don't care which division and which service is being provided by who. They're asking us to look at what it is that they need and how we can better support them.

We felt it was really important to do things all at once so that we're informing and moving it together. The path we've chosen is a bit rocky and is taking a long time and is fraught with ups and downs because we're trying so hard to get it right, but it really is the most fundamental transformation that anyone in the department can remember.

MR. GORDON WILSON: Thank you. I'm just trying to touch on questions that weren't already asked also. Sometimes we're criticized as government of working in silos. In the world that you're in, I think you touch on a lot of different departments, from what I would think - I know that the clients who come through my door - be it the Department of Health and Wellness or whoever it be. Can you tell me what engagement there has been during this process, going back from the start, to encompass the other departments in the province?

MS. HARTWELL: There has been a fair bit and I would say that coming from them as much as us. While we have our own transformation process, of course there have been lots of changes in the Department of Health and Wellness, a significant review in the education system. We actually are probably better aligned than we've been in the 20 years since I've been around.

For example, I've already mentioned the social policy deputy ministers. We have a focus on integrated service delivery now. We actually have a task team formed, again to really focus on the fact that from a client's perspective, they don't care which department is providing the support, they just know that they or their family needs a support. So we're certainly focusing on that.

We have deeper conversations with some of our key partners. The obvious one for us is the Department of Health and Wellness, when we think about disability supports and how we can support people. Our residential options are often for people over the span of a lifetime and some of those people will need significant medical supports as well. We've developed a complex case protocol with the Department of Health and Wellness and we continue to work with them to hone that.

The other department that jumps to mind because we are doing a fair bit of work with them is the Department of Labour and Advanced Education. As you know, they have Nova Scotia Works Centres across the province. We are a small enough province that we should not be duplicating effort so we want to make sure we are taking advantage of their expertise in attaching people to the labour market, which would allow us to focus on people who may need a deeper level of support before they can do that.

The willingness for people to be at a table and put the problem in the middle of the table and work out from that, rather than everyone say well, here's my program, here's my

program. We are really getting a lot of traction from that. I would say it has been marked in the past couple of years that we actually have a very robust deputy ministers' social policy table in particular, that are trying to work outside of the silos as much as possible.

MR. GORDON WILSON: As the Public Accounts Committee, we always like to know about accountability. One of the most important things I think in any program when it's rolled out, and I didn't hear the question asked, is around outcomes. What are you doing to try and track this very complicated rollout in program, as far as giving us an idea? Not only that, but reflecting on what you're doing to make sure that maybe it needs to be changed?

MS. HARTWELL: We have had a significant focus on outcomes. In fact when we started, as impatient as I was to get started on doing something, it was important to do a bit of a reset and make sure we had clear outcomes for the department.

On outcomes, I'll just quickly mention - people need to have control over their own lives. We want clients to have control over their own lives. Client who have their basic needs being met, clients who are safe and secure. Clients who are included in their communities and are, if possible, attached to the labour market. Those are the outcomes for clients.

Then we have systems outcomes. We have a sustainable model that we are as efficient as possible, that we have a mix of prevention and reaction, that we are accessible to all clients and that we have a system that's built on the foundation that clients and staff need to be empowered.

Those seem like very high level motherhood statements, but we've actually gone several steps beyond that. Those are the outcomes. Then we created an entire outcome management framework. How will we know if we're actually moving towards those things? We've actually set measures in all those areas for each program of the department. Every month I get an outcome management framework performance report with a little map of the province that tells me where we are hitting the measures towards those things and where we're not and then we can course correct. It's probably the most oversight we've ever had moving towards that.

Ultimately if what we introduce doesn't actually do the things that we've said, or at least move us towards doing the things that we've said about clients having access to basic needs, feeling included, et cetera, then it's probably not the right thing for us to do. So not only do we have that, but we've created a management reporting framework.

Part of the perennial challenge at Community Services is that we are not able to share easily the progress that we are making, so the narrative that is heard is often just the negative ones. So we are trying very hard to be able to demonstrate that we started here,

we are going to go here, and this is how far we've moved along the path. We're working on it and we have a really robust reporting underneath it that we are always happy to share.

MR. GORDON WILSON: I believe I have one minute? Okay, I've got a five-minute answer here. Education, what are we doing to break that cycle of poverty in the world of education? Truly I think that is where we need to be at - in one minute.

MS. HARTWELL: I won't belabour again the Educate to Work for dependants program but it is something that is a really important step. For many of those clients they will be the first clients in their family to attend post-secondary. Making that possible is a big step in helping to break the cycle.

I would say that we actually have to go even earlier. Part of that is supporting community-based organizations that work with youth - whether that's maybe at the older end with organizations like Phoenix, or at the younger end with probably Big Brothers, Big Sisters, Boys and Girls Club - to help children to see that there can be something different for them.

I would say that even most important in that is empowering their families to be part of that because children grow in families. That's why we have really tried to increase our relationship with family resource centres and support Parenting Journey and other programs, because that really is the key piece for us.

I would say that our youth funding, as I have mentioned several times now, will be focused on prevention and intervention. A lot of that will have an educational component. There are some great community models that many people here would be familiar with. Think about . . .

MR. CHAIRMAN: Order. Time has expired, but I will allow you to continue if you wish. There's a short period of time for your closing comments. You can continue your answer and finish off how you wish in the next two minutes.

MS. HARTWELL: I'll just finish that. There are some organizations that work directly with children that are doing great work. Our role, I think in the department, is to empower those organizations and support those organizations. They're the ones that have the direct relationship with children and their families. But I couldn't agree more that the earlier we can help families take the different path if they can, the better.

In closing, thank you, Mr. Chairman, and thank you to all the members who asked such great questions and listened with such interest to the work that we're doing. I genuinely am always happy to come and talk about the work of Community Services.

If there's one thing that I can leave with, even though you didn't ask me, I'll suggest ways that you might help. I'm going to say that what I hear from people - they might not

use this word a lot, but I think what's underlying it is that people are looking for hope that things are going to be different. They're looking for hope that we actually get their issues and are looking diligently to fix them. I hope you heard today that we are absolutely doing that. We are working diligently to move things forward as fast as we can, as safely as we can, and as responsibly as we can.

Sometimes if the conversation is only ever about what's wrong, people start to lose hope because they don't get to hear some of the good things. I'm not suggesting that we have to live in a Pollyanna world where no one gets to describe what's wrong. But I am asking if we could, at least in conversation, try to work together to provide hope to many Nova Scotians who have not felt that they have been brought along. When there's progress in the province, they don't necessarily feel like they're getting the advantage of that.

The changes that we're trying to make are really hard. They're hard on staff, they're hard on our system, and they're hard on clients who are tired of waiting and who don't know what it means for them until it's rolled out. If we could be part of saying that there's hope for that, that it's a hopeful thing, that would be really appreciated.

Again, thank you for your kind attention.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Thank you to all of you for being with us this morning and answering questions.

Our next meeting is on February 7th with Service Nova Scotia as our witness. We will be discussing service modernization and access centres. Is there any further business to come before the committee?

Hearing none, this meeting is adjourned.

[The committee adjourned at 10:58 a.m.]