

HANSARD

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COMMITTEE

ON

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS

Wednesday, February 23, 2022

LEGISLATIVE CHAMBER

Child Protection Services Caseloads

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Public Accounts Committee

Hon. Kelly Regan (Chair)
Nolan Young (Vice-Chair)
Dave Ritcey
John A. MacDonald
Melissa Sheehy-Richard
Trevor Boudreau
Hon. Brendan Maguire
Claudia Chender
Susan Leblanc

In Attendance:

Kim Langille
Legislative Committee Clerk

Gordon Hebb
Chief Legislative Counsel

Kim Adair,
Auditor General

WITNESSES

Department of Community Services

Tracey Taweel,
Deputy Minister
Tracy Embrett,
Executive Director - Children, Youth and Family Supports



HALIFAX, WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 23, 2022

STANDING COMMITTEE ON PUBLIC ACCOUNTS

9:00 A.M.

CHAIR

Hon. Kelly Regan

VICE CHAIR

Nolan Young

THE CHAIR: I call the Standing Committee on Public Accounts to order. My name is Kelly Regan, the MLA for Bedford Basin and Chair of this committee. Just a reminder to everyone here today to place your phones on silent or vibrate and to keep your mask on except when you are speaking.

I'm going to ask our committee members to introduce themselves, starting with those closest to me on the left-hand side here.

[The committee members introduced themselves.]

THE CHAIR: With us today as well, we have Auditor General Kim Adair, Legislative Counsel Gordon Hebb, Legislative Committee Clerk Kim Langille, and also Kim Leadley from the Committees Office.

On today's agenda, we have officials with us from the Department of Community Services to discuss Child Protection Services caseloads. Just as we have an abundance of Kims at the Public Accounts Committee, DCS has an abundance of Traceys, but I will ask the Traceys to introduce themselves, starting with Deputy Minister Taweel.

[The witnesses introduced themselves.]

THE CHAIR: Deputy Minister Taweel, you're invited to make your opening remarks now.

TRACEY Taweel: Thank you for inviting the Department of Community Services here today. I'm pleased to be speaking with you about the child protection and departmental caseloads. Joining me today is Tracy Embrett, Executive Director of Child, Youth and Family Supports at our department.

Safe and healthy children, youth, and families are vital to building a stronger Nova Scotia. We know that the emotional, social, and physical development of children has a direct impact on their psychological and physical health and on the adult they will become. At DCS, we want to give children the best possible opportunities to find success. Ensuring that children and youth are protected and that families are supported is therefore fundamental to our work. Also fundamental is ensuring that our staff have the appropriate training, support, and resources to do their jobs well.

I am absolutely aware that social workers in child welfare often find themselves in the midst of incredibly challenging and emotional situations. They have some of the most difficult jobs in any sector in government and give their heart and soul each and every day, often under very trying circumstances.

It is also important to note that child welfare is a complex system. Each situation is unique. Providing the help and support to children and families often involves many different people and organizations, including DCS social workers, various family members, foster parents, service providers, and community organizations, and often professionals who work in the health care, education, and justice systems.

For example, a social worker may be investigating a situation of family violence reported by the police involving two parents, with added concerns of substance abuse and mental health challenges. They may be interviewing many people, gathering information, and assessing the immediate risk to a child.

At the same time, the social worker would be working with the parents to establish a voluntary plan to keep everyone safe and well. In addition, they would be accessing services to better understand the risk of further violence, such as mental health and substance abuse professionals. Also, they would develop an intervention and safety plan, and do everything reasonable and possible to keep the family unit together.

There is no doubt that even with the support and addition of other professionals, DCS social workers play a pivotal role. They work tirelessly to respect the integrity of families and avoid interventions that can be traumatic to children, while at the same time

ensuring children's well-being and safety. I want to thank our social workers for their incredible work in supporting the most vulnerable children in our province.

Madam Chair, over the past five years, the number of social workers employed at the Department of Community Services has grown by 8 per cent cumulatively. Given their importance, the department is working to ensure that they are supported to the best extent possible, and we know that more changes are needed. To that end, I'm pleased to report that we are making important advancements and improvements within our Child, Youth and Family Supports division.

We are currently in the process of developing a new child welfare practice framework. This framework will be built around principles and core elements of leading practice and, as the name suggests, will help us improve the quality of child welfare practice in our province. This new framework will be designed to alleviate administrative burden and remove unnecessary administrative tasks from our social workers. It will be developed in direct response to feedback from frontline social workers. We will of course ensure that the practice framework is in complete compliance with the Children and Family Services Act.

Following the development of the framework, we will create a new child welfare policy manual. This manual will be more user-friendly and public-facing and will help us fulfill our goal of separating child welfare policy from child welfare procedure. We expect that the practice framework will be finalized, and work will begin on the policy manual within the next 12 months.

In addition, the committee might be aware that before the first wave of COVID, there were four regional labour/management committees created to address concerns brought forth by social workers within the various child welfare programs. These committees were co-chaired by a social worker and a manager from our service delivery division and had representatives from most offices across the province.

In November 2021, the co-chairs brought forth a number of recommendations in the areas of workload, working after hours, supporting safety, and retention of new social workers. I appreciate the consideration that went into these important recommendations, and I was happy to note that much of what was recommended is work already under way. We will continue to advance on these recommendations as we seek to further improve our system.

The committee might also be aware that evidence shows that working with children and families early on to provide support and help them manage challenges can dramatically impact their outcomes. At the Department of Community Services, we often support families and children when there is a crisis. However, our aim is to move to a child welfare system that focuses more on prevention and early intervention.

Prevention and early intervention involve strengthening children, youth, and families and building their resilience, ultimately negating the need for more intrusive statutory interventions. The focus is on promoting safe, stable, and nurturing relationships and environments for children and families through community-based programs, services, and supports that address their holistic needs.

Through our increased focus on preventative, less-intrusive interventions, programs and services are growing and expanding to more communities across our province. It is my hope and expectation that as we move to a system more grounded in prevention and early intervention, the pressure and workload on our social workers will ease.

As you are likely aware, amendments were made to the Children and Family Services Act in 2017. These amendments expanded the definition of abuse and neglect, streamlined court processes, and allowed the department to better plan for children with respect to their identity and cultural connections, and better support permanency for children.

As anticipated, following these amendments the number of referrals to child protection increased. The percentage of investigations that result from those referrals is about 60 per cent, which is consistent with what was anticipated. The percentage of those investigations which are substantiated is about 50 per cent.

One of the key differences with the amendments is that referrals now include risk of abuse or neglect versus abuse or neglect actually having occurred. This means that at our department, we have the opportunity to offer services earlier. As a result, more families are now receiving supports and gaining connection in their communities and fewer children are actually coming into care. Five years ago, 1,020 children were in care. That number now sits at 884.

At DCS, we want all families to be safe and healthy. We want our social workers to have the best support possible, and be well resourced in doing their jobs, and we want to build a system that is less driven by crisis and based more on prevention and earlier interventions. We are committed to this work, and change is happening. With those remarks, I would be happy to take your questions.

THE CHAIR: Thank you, Deputy Minister Taweel. We're going to start the first round of questioning with the Liberal caucus for 20 minutes, followed by the NDP, and then the PC caucus.

Just so our witnesses know, when we reach the 20-minute mark, I will interrupt even if people are speaking. That's just how we do it. Then, we'll have a second round of questioning afterward, depending on how much time is left over.

With that, I would like to recognize my colleague, the honourable Brendan Maguire.

HON. BRENDAN MAGUIRE: I've got a lot of questions, so I'm just going to look for some quick answers. Do you feel that the child protection services is a success?

TRACEY TAWHEEL: I would say there is absolutely success occurring in child protection on a daily basis. Our social workers work very hard to provide the best possible supports. As this committee would be aware, every family, every case, every child is unique, and I'm very proud of the work that child protection social workers perform every day to customize supports and services to meet the needs of those families and children.

BRENDAN MAGUIRE: I'm going to read you some statistics here. Eighty-one per cent of the general public graduate from high school, right? Forty-four per cent of children in care graduate from high school, with 90 per cent of them going on income assistance within the first six months after aging out. Is that a success?

TRACEY TAWHEEL: Could you tell me where you accessed those statistics, because, certainly, our statistics would demonstrate that children in care who progress to post-secondary education actually have a higher graduation rate than the general population. I would be really interested in seeing the statistics.

I am not negating at all that children who come into care certainly have additional challenges and require additional supports to ensure that they can successfully complete secondary school. Post-care and custody arrangements when children age out of care is absolutely also an area where we have placed increased focus and will continue to place increased focus.

BRENDAN MAGUIRE: I'm just asking for shorter answers on these, please, because we only have 20 minutes. That was just a quick survey that was done nationally by Foster Up, which is a national group. It was published in MacLean's magazine, and I can table that, also.

We do know that - well, here, I'll start this way. How many children are in care right now? I just need the number.

TRACEY TAWHEEL: Eight hundred and eighty-four.

BRENDAN MAGUIRE: How many former wards of the court and children in care are on income assistance - ones who aged out - or have had experience in the judicial system?

TRACEY TAWHEEL: I'm sorry, I would not have that exact number with me today. I can endeavour to secure that for you, but I don't have it with me today.

BRENDAN MAGUIRE: So the Department of Community Services keeps those statistics? I've been told in the past the Department of Community Services doesn't actually keep statistics on children in care and where they end up. Are you saying that the Department of Community Services does keep those statistics?

[9:15 a.m.]

TRACEY TAWHEEL: We do keep some statistics. It is difficult, through our case management system, to track. They are separate categories in our system to protect the privacy of clients that the Department of Community Services serves. I will see what I can secure for you.

I'm not sure I can secure those exact numbers. Certainly, your question with regard to the judicial system, I would not have those statistics.

BRENDAN MAGUIRE: The reason I ask that is because we hear from the department that this is a privacy matter. I would argue that nothing is probably more private than your own personal health care, yet the Department of Health and Wellness keeps statistics on everything.

If you go down to a shelter, if you speak to people on income assistance, if you speak to people in the judicial system, and ask them if they had any experience in the child welfare system, a large percentage of them have. I'm speaking from my own personal - I just look around at the people that I grew up with that were in care and where they ended up.

I don't have an issue with the people working at - so please don't take this personally. My issue is that when you become a ward of the court, the minister is your parent. They're your guardian, and we know that. I have three children. I know where my children are going to end up because I will be with them every step of the way. If my daughter or son at age 21 ends up in the judicial system, I'm going to do everything to help them.

These are kids who have faced some of the grossest and most difficult circumstances. I always say to people that I became an adult at five years old. I made my first adult decision at five years old when I was asked by a family if I want to stay in that foster care system - if I wanted to stay in their home and move to Toronto with them and never see my family again, or I can go back into the foster care system. At five years old, they told me you are too old to be adopted. You are going to be in multiple foster homes.

We know the trauma that these kids are facing and have had on them. I just think that the success rate for the Department of Community Services is something for anyone to be proud of. I don't think it's something for any government to be proud of, no matter

your political stripe. There is the term, repeating the cycle, and that's partly due to Department of Community Services.

I'm sorry I'm ranting. I want quick answers because I've got a lot of questions on this stuff, but you're talking about a transformation and changing the system, and in your opening statement all I heard about was staff. I understand the pressure they're under. I have a lot of friends who are social workers. I have a lot of close friends who have been working in the system for a long time, and they've got huge hearts. They'll tell you that when you transition from the non-profit sector into Department of Community Services, it beats you down. It wears you out.

When you speak to non-profit providers, when you speak to people who are dealing with the Department of Community Services, their number one complaint is the Department of Community Services. That's their number one complaint, dealing with the bureaucracy within the Department of Community Services, dealing with the fences that are put up, the walls that are put up.

I have two questions for you. This has been a known issue since the beginning of time. How do we rely more on the people on the ground and give them the resources they need, and what is this department doing? I don't think this is a department that should be working in a silo, and I don't think you are, but I think this should be a more open department. You should be working with the judicial system. You should have those numbers. You should be working with them. You should know first-hand how many of those kids that the minister and this department are personally responsible for.

How many of those kids end up in jail? I find it troubling that we don't know, but if you look at the statistics, it's considerably - we're talking astronomically higher than the general public, especially with minorities and Indigenous people. What is the department doing to ensure better outcomes for those children, and what are you doing to break down the barriers so that people on the ground have more input and access?

TRACEY TAWHEEL: I'm just going to say: this answer is not going to be short, because you've asked me a number of really complicated questions, so I'm going to try to cover everything that you've referenced.

I would like to go back and clarify one of my earlier points. When I was referring to not having statistics for children in care entering the judicial system, I was referring to former children in care. If a child is currently a child in care, then absolutely - as the wise and conscientious parent - we are absolutely aware of all the circumstances surrounding current children in care.

When children age out of our system, we put in place post-custody and care arrangements. I will say freely to this committee that those arrangements need to be more robust - I have said this a number of times in the department. To your earlier point, when

your child becomes 21 years of age - when my child turned 21 - we don't just say, that's it, you're grown, you're on your own. We continue to provide supports as parents.

Certainly, we have a number of new programs and supports in place in terms of covering tuition costs and things like that to support children as they age out - helping them learn how to transition and live independently. There's a lot more, though, that we can be doing with regard to children aging out of the system. I would just start there.

In terms of what the Department of Community Services is doing, long before I arrived in the department, the department did begin what was known at the time as a transformation exercise to overhaul all aspects of the department. With regard specifically to child welfare, there are a number of activities that are under way now. I'll focus my response there.

We actively monitor caseloads of all of our frontline social workers in order to ensure that children in care or children coming into contact or families coming into contact with the department get the best possible . . .

BRENDAN MAGUIRE: Madam Chair . . .

THE CHAIR: Perhaps we could let the deputy minister answer her question.

TRACEY TAWHEEL: Thank you. That is an actual system change that's happening in real time on the ground. We redeploy social workers from within regions and from across regions to ensure that the families - the children in that particular catchment area, if you will - are receiving the best possible care. We have enhanced our relationships with not-for-profit community-based service providers on the ground through investments in prevention and early intervention. We now have more programs than ever providing that on-the-ground community-based support.

Ideally, we don't want children to come into the care of the minister. We don't want to disrupt a family unit. We want them to receive support as early as possible. We know the best place to receive that support is through a community-based organization.

Coming into contact with the Department of Community Services is very traumatic for a family, similar to coming into contact with the Department of Justice or other social departments of that nature. There is no question. We need to make that process as painless as possible.

Some of that means having the support provided by skilled and capable community providers to reduce the stigma of requiring a bit of help with parenting skills, requiring a little bit of help supporting your children, getting addictions and mental health supports at the local level. All of those components are actively in place now and will continue to grow in the upcoming year.

My reference in my opening remarks to reviewing the child welfare policy manual will make a significant difference in terms of how we operate the system. Right now, our policy manual is a mix of policies and procedures. It is not posted on our website. It is accessible, but it's not posted on our website.

We are seeking to remove the administrative burden from our frontline social workers so that they can actually do what we've hired them to do, which is to support families and children and not be bound up in all of the administrative functions that currently are dictated through our child welfare policy manual. I see you're signalling me.

BRENDAN MAGUIRE: To some of your points, how much on average does a social worker spend with their client? How much time in the run of a year? Let's just say in the run of a week or a month, because those relationships are important. Do you still have the policy where social workers change their clientele every five years?

TRACEY TAWHEEL: It wouldn't be possible for me to estimate the number of hours that a social worker spends with a client because, as I said earlier, every case is unique. A social worker may have a case load of 18, and of that 18, half of that case load are less complex, if you will. By saying that, I'm not diminishing the importance of that case at all, but some of the other cases may require much more hands-on time and investment on the part of that social worker.

It's also important to remember that multiple social workers can be involved in a case, depending on what that child needs. As I referenced earlier, multiple other professionals can also be involved in wrapping around either that family unit or that child to make sure that they are as stable as possible, that they are as supported as possible. With regards to the final piece of your question, I'll look to my colleague because I'm not sure if that policy remains in place or not. (Interruption) No, I didn't think so. Changing it up every five years, no.

BRENDAN MAGUIRE: The ultimate outcome here is the success and the well-being of the child. One of the issues that I have with this conversation today is when we ask questions on details - the last question was how much time your social workers are spending on average. I don't think the Department of Community Services knows, and when you talk to social workers, they're telling us not enough. Their caseloads are too large.

I know that the resources that I had as a youth are completely different than they are today. Charmaine Tanner was my social worker. She actually called me on election day in 2013 and congratulated me. She was my social worker. I had one before her, but she was pretty much my social worker the entire time. We built a personal relationship, and that was the only real adult relationship that I had for a long time that I trusted.

We do know there's a lot of turnover with children and social workers. They're encouraged - whether we'll admit this here today or not - but if you talk to social workers, they're encouraged not to create personal relationships with children, not to have that personal relationship. That's troubling to me because a lot of times that is their only adult that they trust.

Do we know, do you know if a child was in care today - let's say they came in at five years old and they age out of the system. How many foster homes do they go through if they're not adopted? That's the only question. How many foster homes over a 16-year period we'll say - or whatever the average period is for a child in care - how many foster homes on average does a child go through?

TRACEY TAWHEEL: I know you've asked a very specific question, but I cannot let your comment go without responding - in terms of social workers being encouraged to not have personal relationships with their clients. I vehemently disagree with that statement. I cannot allow that to stand.

Social workers build very strong, nurturing, and loving relationships with the children in their care. I am flabbergasted by that statement, and I cannot allow it to stand. Every social worker that I have met since coming to the Department of Community Services - every contact I have with their supervisors, with their managers - would demonstrate the polar opposite of what you have just said.

A few months ago, I had the privilege to attend an award ceremony called the oh yeah awards - the outstanding youth awards. At those awards, children in care receive awards. They are nominated by their social workers, they're nominated by their foster parents, they're nominated by community organizations. To a child, they highlighted their relationship with their social worker as being fundamental to their success.

I am not saying this to indicate that our system is perfect - far from it - but the social workers who work within our system give their heart and soul every single day. They care about every child who comes into contact with them, whether that child comes into care or not.

With regard to your question about . . .

BRENDAN MAGUIRE: Madam Chair, I'd like to respond.

THE CHAIR: Let her finish. She's going to finish her answer.

TRACEY TAWHEEL: With regard to your question about the average number of foster homes that a child would pass through, that would be a very difficult question for me to answer as well, because every child's needs are unique.

[9:30 a.m.]

We have not made a secret of the fact that we need more foster homes. We need more foster parents. We need more diversity within our foster parents. We need to support our foster parents better. That is why we are redesigning our foster care system to increase the number of foster families . . .

THE CHAIR: Order. The time for the Liberal caucus questioning has elapsed. We will now go to the NDP caucus. Ms. Leblanc.

SUSAN LEBLANC: Thank you to our guests for your opening comments. I just have a quick one that came from your opening comments. You talked about how since the new Act the number of children in care has gone down. Five years ago it was 1,020 - now it's 884. Wondering if you can break that down by age categories so we can get a better picture of if there is a correlation between age and going into care less.

TRACEY TAWHEEL: I'd be happy to get that for you. I might have it here, but I would have to dig it out. I'd be happy to get you that breakdown, absolutely.

SUSAN LEBLANC: I'll leave that for now. I just want to get the conversation back to staffing issues and issues with the actual frontline workers. How many vacancies are there currently within Child, Youth and Family Supports, and how many of those vacancies are frontline positions?

TRACEY TAWHEEL: Frontline social workers actually work in service delivery, so they're not part of the Children, Youth and Family Supports division - they're part of service delivery. The vacancy factor for that particular cohort is about 6 per cent. DCS overall has, roughly, a 6 per cent vacancy factor. It's the same in that cohort, which would represent approximately 25, I'll say, positions - but it could be pieces of positions.

SUSAN LEBLANC: That's under service delivery. Does that mean that Ms. Embrett doesn't know on a given day how many frontline social workers in child protection vacancies there are? Does she have to check with the head of service delivery on that? That feels like a strange situation, and maybe not efficient. Can you just clarify that?

TRACEY TAWHEEL: The way the Department of Community Services is structured is that we have a service delivery division that delivers all frontline service - not just child welfare, but employment supports, disability supports, et cetera. Then we have three program divisions, and those program divisions set the policy and procedures that service delivery adheres to.

Within service delivery, there are frontline social workers as well. They, likewise, have managers and supervisors who are tasked with managing their work on a day-to-day basis. They monitor caseload numbers. If you've called in sick, they make sure that your

caseload is properly distributed across the other social workers. In instances where perhaps redistributing that caseload would be problematic within a region, they look outside of a region to ensure that any statutory requirements that need to be met are met. It is a very integrated and matrix organization.

SUSAN LEBLANC: When you reference the 25 positions or 6 per cent, that's across all service delivery?

TRACEY TAWHEEL: When I talk about 25 positions, that is within Child Welfare Services and service delivery.

SUSAN LEBLANC: The budget for Child, Youth and Family Supports was lower in 2021-22 than it was in 2014-15. Since 2015, there's been a steady increase in the number of referrals to Child, Youth and Family Supports, and the number of applications filed with the courts under the Act. Can you explain why there has not been a budget increase to correspond with the rising caseloads?

We've talked about this a lot. We know that when the Act came in - and you've referenced it already, that because the duty to report and all that has expanded, we know that there are going to be more referrals but there has been no budget increase. In fact, there's been a budget decrease. Can you speak to that correlation, or lack thereof?

TRACEY TAWHEEL: Thank you for the question. I'm just trying to find my numbers here, because in fact, Child, Youth and Family Supports has actually increased. It's been steadily increasing over the last five years.

It's been increasing for a couple of reasons. One is because we've seen an increase, unfortunately, in emergency placements, because we've had a decline in the number of foster families that are available to accept children coming into temporary care or permanent care. Also, we have increased our funding from a prevention and early intervention perspective that's provided out to communities.

Before we wrap up here today, I will find my numbers, but what you have stated is actually inconsistent with our budget estimates over the last number of years. It has been steadily increasing.

SUSAN LEBLANC: It may be that I've misinterpreted the numbers or that I'm misunderstanding it. I will also get clarification on that.

There was a mandatory four-year review of the Children and Family Services Act that was recently conducted. The consultation submission from the Nova Scotia College of Social Workers notes that Children, Youth and Family services has seen increasing and growing demand for services, with referrals increasing, more substantiated cases, and more applications being made under the Act. However, there have been no new resources placed

in the division to tackle the increasing demand - this is what I've just been referring to - but the college has called for a proper open review of the entire Act to ensure that we're providing a safe and effective child welfare system.

Now, speaking of the college, Executive Director Alec Stratford - I had asked this committee many times to approve his presence at this committee today. That idea was voted down so we can't ask him directly, but he works with frontline social workers, as you know. I'm disappointed that he's not here today. I'll ask you the question I would have asked him, which is: Will the department conduct an open review of the entire Children and Family Services Act?

TRACEY TAWHEEL: Thank you for the question. You are correct in noting that the review that we just completed was more narrow in scope. That was because of COVID and our inability to be able to conduct a more fulsome review of the Act that would have involved meeting potentially face to face, and all of our resources needed to be focused on COVID response. We completed that review.

We are required every five years by the Act to complete a mandatory review, and yes, we will be conducting a full review of the Act. Scoping out that work has begun.

SUSAN LEBLANC: There was a "How's Work Going?" survey in 2019 in Nova Scotia. That survey found that only 44 per cent of the Department of Community Services employees said that they felt valued. The same survey found that 57 per cent of the employees at the department said that workloads were unreasonable, and only 41 per cent indicated that they felt safe and supported to bring forward new ideas.

I'm wondering, what specific steps has the department taken since 2019 to address the issue of unreasonable workloads?

TRACEY TAWHEEL: Some of the items I've already referenced in terms of what we've looked at with regards to helping manage caseloads - I'll just quickly repeat a few of these in response to your questions.

We're certainly monitoring caseloads and looking to redeploy those caseloads either within or across regions. We're also exploring the creation of a casual relief social worker pool, so we can bring social workers in similar to the way substitute teachers might get called in when there's a shortage; we're exploring that. You referenced the college - we're hoping to work in collaboration with the college on a recruitment and retention strategy to bring more social workers to DCS, and certainly to retain those who we have.

The comment that I made earlier in response to MLA Maguire's questions with regards to the child welfare policy framework - I think that is a critical component to supporting social workers and ensuring that they actually can do what they were hired to do and not be burdened by such heavy administrative requirements. We really need to strip

that out of their role so that they can spend more time with children in their care, and we can hope to reduce some of the level of workload and burden that are on our frontline social workers.

With regards to your comments regarding the How's Work Going? survey, we have undertaken a number of initiatives to increase internal communication within the department. You didn't highlight that, but that was one of the critical components where we needed to make progress, so we've worked to increase internal communication at the local, regional, and province-wide level. During COVID-19, we ensured that employees right across the department were updated on a daily basis in terms of what was happening province-wide and also within our department.

We also have what is called a change ambassador network in the department, which are individuals in every single office who work with their teams to support them through what has been significant change in the department. We no longer talk about the department being in transformation - we're well beyond that now. We're in implementation. That doesn't mean that we're done. There is a lot of work that we still need to do.

What pleases me when I look at the 2019 results is that the previous survey - we had some growth in terms of improvement in 2019. We have a long way to go. The Department of Community Services, whether we're talking about child welfare or we're talking about income assistance or we're talking about disability supports - any of the services that we provide, in my view, is some of the most challenging and meaningful and impactful work that any public servant can do. With that comes a lot of stress and anxiety and concern for the individuals who come into contact with our department. We absolutely have a lot more ongoing and continuous work to do to support our public servants.

SUSAN LEBLANC: I'm really happy to hear about a retention and recruitment strategy, because the other two things that you said filled me with a little anxiety myself. It speaks to what Mr. Maguire was saying earlier, and it speaks to a lot of what we hear in my constituency office with folks who are connected with child and family services.

Families get 18 months to figure their stuff out, or a year to figure their stuff out. They have to go through parenting programs, they have to do this, they have to do that. They've got a whole range of things, and that's a huge amount of stress. On the other side of that, the social workers are overworked and underpaid and going off on stress leave. This family who's super vulnerable now has three different social workers or drawing from a pool of substitute social workers. It feels like that's super hard to get your stuff together in that shortened time frame in order to be successful.

The result is that families are torn apart when, if there was more emphasis on one social worker following a case through the entire process, maybe that would make the whole situation much more successful, and then we don't have kids in care, and then we don't have kids in the justice system, and it just goes on and on.

[9:45 a.m.]

Going off script here for a second, I would love to ask you something. In order to make that happen - to make it so that there are enough social workers who aren't burnt out, who are feeling supported to see a family through the whole process - what do you need? What would be your ask of the government to say: in order to actually make this happen, we need this amount of money and this amount of help to get social workers from other places, and we need housing for them? What do you need? I'm speaking as though I am the government. Clearly, I am not.

TRACEY TAWHEEL: Actually, I think we probably have what we need. What we need to improve is what we have those resources doing. It is about reforming the way we do our work in the department. It's been discussed long before I arrived in the department. I do believe we are starting to make some headway. We still have a lot of work to do.

What you've described in terms of one social worker having contact with that family and consistent contact, that is absolutely what we want to see happen. It is not in the best interests of that child or that family to have multiple touch points, to tell their story repeatedly. That is not good for that family - we recognize that. In order to move to that more ideal state, we have to remove some of the administrative burden off of our social workers. We have to examine really closely what we're asking them to do.

To your earlier question, we have to take a good, close look at the Act again. The Act was reformed in 2015 and came into effect in 2017: what has changed since then? Arguably, a lot, in terms of our own understanding and knowledge of what families need and what they have a right to expect. We need to take a look at that Act again. We need to ensure that from a cultural perspective, it is robust enough, that we're providing the right supports. We need to take into consideration some of the changes that have happened on the federal front with federal Indigenous child welfare legislation. There are a lot of things that we need to look at.

All of those pieces combined, I think, will help us move to a better place in terms of the workload and the stress on social workers, which in turn, has an impact on the service that they're able to provide to families. They still give their best and their all every single day, but I know that takes a toll on all of those social workers. We do need to continue to keep our head down and focused on making those reforms that we need to make the system as strong as it can be.

Prevention and early intervention are key components of this. Continuing to invest in community organizations, building up what those organizations need, listening to them are key. This committee would be aware that in November, we ended the practice of birth alerts, for example. That was a long time coming. Ending the practice of birth alerts allows us to support families to voluntarily access resources within the community. It is voluntary.

There will still be times where families will need stronger interventions if there is risk identified upon the birth of a child, but that's not what we want.

We want support at the community level through Family Resource Centres, through Boys and Girls Clubs, through those organizations that we know can have a really significant impact and reduce the need for a family to come into such deep and intimate contact with a bureaucracy. As much as we care, we are a bureaucracy.

THE CHAIR: Ms. Chender.

CLAUDIA CHENDER: I'll just follow up on that. One of the concerns that was raised by our caucus when the Act was amended was around the shortened timelines. We know that this actually puts additional strain on frontline workers because they're not reflective of the wait times for community-based or court ordered service, and especially now that's the case.

Knowing that time is short, I guess my question is: When families are required to access services because of court orders, would you say that they're available in a timely manner? If not, what is the Department of Community Services doing to ensure that those services can be obtained?

TRACEY TAWHEEL: I would say some of the investments that we're making at the community level are helping with that. We do have more work that we need to do in terms of ensuring that community-based organizations have the resources available to provide those services when they are needed. I would say our community partners work very hard, particularly in situations where the service is required on a court ordered basis to make sure that service is available, but we do need to make sure that those community-based organizations are properly resourced as well. As we increase the availability of . . .

THE CHAIR: Order. The time for the NDP questioning has elapsed. We will now go over to the PC caucus. Mr. Boudreau.

TREVOR BOUDREAU: I just want to thank the department for coming today. This is a very important topic. I do believe having discussions about our most vulnerable - whether it's in health care, long-term care or in community services - it's very important to get a good handle and an understanding of where we are and where we need to be.

With that being said, we know that foster care is a key pillar of our child welfare system. Could you tell me about how the redesign of the foster care system, and the investment of an additional \$34 million over three years will impact the work for social workers?

TRACEY TAWHEEL: As you have indicated, we have begun the redesign of our foster care system. We will be investing \$34 million over the next three years to overhaul

and redesign the system. The foster care system has needed this enhancement for a very long time. These changes were very welcomed by current and former foster families, as well as the Federation of Foster Families Nova Scotia.

Maybe I'll just very quickly explain what the redesign will look like, and then I'll respond to the final portion of your question about impact for frontline social workers. Presently, we have three general types of foster care placements. What we lack is an emergency receiving capacity, as well as robust, specialized foster care placements. As one example, when a child unfortunately needs to be taken into care, emergency receiving will allow us to have an emergency placement for that child that is in a safe and nurturing foster parent home, versus needing to place that child in an emergency placement. That will be a massive change within the system.

The way our redesign will work is that essentially, we will be establishing constellations, if you will, of foster homes in communities and regions right across this province. Within those constellations of foster homes, there will be a lead home. That lead home will be a highly trained and skilled foster parent, foster family, who will help support and provide the network of support out to all of those other foster families within their constellation.

They'll also provide respite, which is another really critical component in our foster care system. Foster parents, like all parents, sometimes need to take a little break. We find when foster parents don't get a break, we see them taking really long breaks where they need three or four months off where they're not able to accept a child into care. Having a respite system created is going to help alleviate some of that burden.

We're also putting new financial supports in place to better compensate or reimburse foster parents to make sure that they understand they are a valuable and a critical component of the continuum of care that is provided to children in temporary or permanent care of the minister.

With regard to how that will impact frontline social workers, there are a number of ways. First of all, having the availability of foster homes to place children coming into care relieves a significant burden off the shoulders of social workers who not only need to make the very difficult and risk-based decision to take a child into care, but they also need to work with a team of professionals in the department to determine where best to place that child. Having the availability of a foster home removes a lot of that burden from the shoulders of a social worker and also will result in better outcomes for those children, which is ultimately what we are all hoping for.

The enhanced training, as well, that our foster families will receive - the enhanced relationship that this redesign is going to foster, no pun intended, between social workers and foster families - will also help ensure that those foster families, as I said earlier, are really very much integrated and part of the care team for that child. It provides the social

worker with a very real-time assessment of how that child is doing. The recommendations of those foster parents really matter a lot in terms of what they're seeing in the day-to-day with the children whom we've placed in their care. I hope I've covered all the components of your question.

TREVOR BOUDREAU: That was a good depth of what I was looking for. I'm looking forward to seeing this redesign unfold.

Just more onto that, though. When you were developing the redesign for that foster care program, did you engage or consult with foster families or youth in care when you did this look at a redesign?

TRACEY TAWHEEL: Yes, we did. We consulted with current foster families, we consulted with the Federation of Foster Families of Nova Scotia, and we also consulted with current and former children in care. A significant portion or piece as well that I neglected to mention with regards to this redesign will be the creation of a youth advisory panel that will be comprised of current and former children in care whom we will seek input and advice from as the redesign rolls forward, and will stay in place into the future so that we have real-time information and feedback coming in from children who are actually in the system.

Our hope is that we can iterate in real time. If we see things that aren't working, we can look to make changes. We can ensure that the components that we really need to see in a redesigned foster care system, that they're strong, they're robust, and we address any concerns as they arise in real time.

TREVOR BOUDREAU: My next question is on the child and youth commission and that aspect. How would that child and youth commission help identify and address issues affecting the department? How do you see that? Can you go in a bit more detail on how you see that relationship with the department?

TRACEY TAWHEEL: What I was referring to is a panel basically of youth who are currently in care who will provide us with feedback on our care system overall and the foster care system specifically, but also feedback on their experiences in child welfare - if their needs are being met, what they're hearing from their peers. It'll allow us to really make changes in real time, as I said, and be responsive to what they need.

I think you were referring to the creation of a child and youth commission. Government has indicated support for the creation of a child and youth commission. That child and youth commission will have all the powers of a child and youth advocate, including the ability to look at individual cases both reactively, but also look at the system proactively and advance system reforms for systems that children and youth in our province come into contact with.

It will be a significant benefit to the Department of Community Services, but also other social departments that children and youth come into contact with, such as the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, the Department of Justice, the Department of Health and Wellness, et cetera.

[10:00 a.m.]

There is the possibility of this child and youth commission really enabling us to work, as I said, both reactively and proactively with an independent, arms-length organization that will provide us with real-time feedback on how our systems are positively or perhaps negatively impacting children and youth in our province.

TREVOR BOUDREAU: Thank you, Madam Chair, and I think that's it for me for now. I'll pass it on to Ms. Sheehy-Richard.

THE CHAIR: Ms. Sheehy-Richard.

MELISSA SHEEHY-RICHARD: Thank you, deputy minister, for being here today. It's evident to see how much care and compassion you have for the job that you do.

I just wanted to go back to your opening remarks. You mentioned that prevention and early intervention programs will have an impact on social worker overload over the long term. Can you describe for me what the Department of Community Services is doing related to the expansion of the prevention and early intervention programs and the services?

TRACEY TAWHEEL: Traditionally the department has always had investments in prevention and early intervention. Over the course of the last two years and moving into the future, increased investments have been placed in prevention and early intervention because of the recognition of how significant an impact those earlier interventions can have on children and families.

We have expanded a number of our programs right across this province, working in partnership with our service providers - for example, the Parenting Journey program, the Nurturing Strong African Nova Scotian Families program. We're piloting a number of different programs right across this province. All of those programs, regardless of what the scope of those programs are, have the goal of supporting families when they are at a relatively low level of risk, I would say, versus the higher kind of crisis-driven level of risk when typically, that is when the department would become involved.

A lot of our work is crisis driven. A lot of our system has been crisis driven. We need to move that to a much more proactive, less crisis-driven environment. We will always have situations where a more intrusive intervention is required. Unfortunately, it is the nature of child welfare. There will always be some circumstances like that. Our goal, though, is to continue to reduce the number of children who come into the care of the

minister by ensuring that families get the voluntary supports that they need before we have to intervene more intrusively.

The stats that I provided in terms of the number of substantiated cases - “substantiated case” does not mean that a child comes into care. It means that there are risks, perhaps, that that family is experiencing, and perhaps those risks can be mitigated through a safety plan that is developed and through supports at the community level. We know their outcomes are so much better if there’s an intervention at the community level than if that child ultimately needs to be taken into care. Accessing things like addiction supports, mental health supports, and other supports that actually fall outside the purview of the Department of Community Services, are likewise very important to ensure that families have that kind of wraparound support that they need in order to be successful.

I’ll just close by saying that I think anyone who is a parent recognizes that there are times where everybody needs support. We all need support. We all try to do the best that we can, and so too do the families that come into contact with the Department of Community Services. Sometimes we need help. It’s the same for the families who come into contact with us. Sometimes they need help. We want to ensure that that help is the least intrusive it can possibly be, so we will continue to invest in those supports at the community level and helping families earlier.

MELISSA SHEEHY-RICHARD: Community supports are so valuable, especially in rural Nova Scotia, in particular. They’re very important.

I just wanted to see if you could speak a little bit about how the redesigned framework for the foster care program will work to ensure that the cultural background of the child is prioritized when they come into care?

TRACEY TAWHEEL: We recognize that we still have a lot of work to do when it comes to supporting the culture of children who come into care. We have made some changes to better recognize and develop a cultural plan to support children if they come into the care of the Province. We need to attract more diverse foster parents into our foster care system. In order to do that, we need to provide them with the appropriate supports so that they recognize the incredible value that they have for children who come into the care of the minister, who come into the care of the Province.

The redesigned foster care system will have a significant cultural component. We are taking advice from Mi’kmaw Family and Children’s Services of Nova Scotia as well as the African Nova Scotian community and other communities in terms of what is required when a child does come into foster care. That is going to require cultural awareness training for staff. That’s going to involve recruitment strategies that ensure that individuals who might be considering becoming a foster parent really understand that not just their love and care are needed but also that the cultural competence and awareness that they bring can

help to ensure that a child in care actually has a role model and sees a path forward for themselves.

Cultural competence, cultural awareness, will be a critical component in the constellations that I described that will be in place right across the province. We are actively seeking advice and input through a steering committee that includes representatives from culturally diverse communities.

THE CHAIR: Mr. Ritcey.

DAVE RITCEY: Madam Chair, how much time do I have left?

THE CHAIR: You have four minutes left.

DAVE RITCEY: Thank you. In what ways do we anticipate that the redesign of the foster care program will improve the administrative role and the red tape associated with the program? What benefit is this expected to have on the workload for caseworkers and social workers moving forward?

TRACEY TAWHEEL: From an administrative burden perspective, I'll respond to that, I guess, from two angles. First, in the past, foster parents have shouldered quite a significant administrative burden in terms of submitting receipts and accounting for every expense they incurred with children in their care. We have streamlined that process considerably and will continue to streamline that process at the same time that we increase the per diem rates that will be provided to foster parents.

For the frontline social worker, to my earlier comment, knowing that there are foster homes available to place a child will certainly reduce some of the stress and anxiety on the shoulders of the social worker. The work that we're doing in terms of the child welfare policy manual that guides their work, removing a lot of the administrative burden through the overhaul of that manual will have a significant impact on their workload as well.

It's being approached - reducing that administrative burden, you used the word "red tape." Reducing that is really critical to allow social workers to do - as I've said a number of times now, I know, this morning - what they've trained to do. They're highly skilled professionals. They've been trained to not be bogged down in administrative paperwork. We need them to be working proactively with families as well as in our redesigned foster system, working with the constellations, and they lead the hub home in the middle of that constellation, working with those families to make sure that they have the support that they need.

In order for this to be successful, we have to remove some of the burden off the shoulders of those frontline social workers. It's critical to the success of foster care redesign.

DAVE RITCEY: Thank you, deputy minister, for the answer. This is the second part of my question. Are there ways to use technology to modernize administration to save time for these workers?

TRACEY TAWHEEL: We have implemented a number of new technologies to support our frontline social workers - smartphones, voice note technology, things that will allow them to free up time. We are also making changes in terms of our case management system to ensure that when they need to use the system, it is a simplified process.

We are open to using technology in whatever way we possibly can in order to reduce the burden that's on our social workers, providing them with Chromebooks or iPads and things like that, so that when they're out visiting families, they can more readily take notes, file those notes. Technology is absolutely an enabler. It doesn't take the place of the face to face, but hopefully it frees up a little bit of time so that our social workers can invest more of that time with families and children who are on their caseloads.

THE CHAIR: Mr. Ritcey, you have 15 seconds.

DAVE RITCEY: Thank you so much, Deputy Minister Taweel, for answering those questions. We definitely value the work and efforts of all our social workers right across the province.

THE CHAIR: We'll now move on to the second round of questioning. It's nine minutes per caucus, beginning with the Liberal caucus. Mr. Maguire.

BRENDAN MAGUIRE: I just want to pick up where we were last time. I do want to say specifically that I wasn't questioning the desire and the will of social workers and of staff. I would argue that it's the caring and the heart of the social worker that's actually leading to some of the burnout, because they put their heart and soul in this job. We do see quite a bit of turnover.

I've heard some people refer to a social worker's entry position into government - that it's a job they don't want to stay in long. I think that the survey that the member for Dartmouth North referenced should be an eye-opener for the department on how their employees are feeling. Those were pretty low and pretty - let's be honest - terrible results from the employees. I'm glad to see you in this role, because I think that when we have employees who are burned out and tired, that reflects on their work. Their work is, I would argue, some of the most important work anyone will ever do.

We hear stories from my community and other communities where, because of burnout and short staff, kids aren't able to go home for Christmas, because they don't have a drive. They're supposed to get a drive to their parents' house, but they weren't able to make it because of short staff. Those are the things that I think are probably top of mind. Those kinds of issues are probably top of mind for all of you.

I just wanted to say that I wasn't attacking social workers or their staff, or yourself. As you know, it's something I'm very passionate about. It's something that's a huge issue not just in my community, but all of Nova Scotia. We do see that when children are not given the proper resources and not given what they need to be successful in life, this carries on with them.

I know we talked about post-secondary education. Part of this is that my entire time in care, and people whom I've spoken to - and I've done a lot of advocacy work for this - very seldom are we preached the importance of post-secondary education. It's not just access to post-secondary education - it's breaking the cycle.

[10:15 a.m.]

I can think of one family in particular where five of them were in care. Two of them are on income assistance, one is in jail for the rest of his life, and two of them have gone on to, we'll say, have regular jobs. That's not a good success rate, and we see a lot of that. I'm really looking forward to this very difficult work that you have to do. This isn't just about the now. It's one of those things where it's about the future, and if we don't get this right, this is going to impact everything.

I pray that you guys get it right. I know that in the past we've seen increases to funding for foster care families. The previous government, apparently - for the former Community Services Minister, who's now the Chair sitting in the room, I know this was a big thing. I've spoken at the Federation of Foster Families of Nova Scotia, and one thing they talked about was resources and having those resources.

Respite time is huge, not just for foster families but for families who are dealing with some more difficult situations. I spoke to someone two days ago in Greystone; I went into their home. They have five children, all autistic. They have respite for one child. This family is ready to just break down, and they're being denied respite for the other children.

Again, I do understand and appreciate the work that's been done and the funding and the research that's gone into this. We keep talking about the Family Resource Centres and the Boys and Girls Clubs and relying on them for a bigger purpose, we'll say, to help with this. Those organizations - some of them don't, but most of them have a full-time fundraiser. They have to raise millions and millions of dollars every year.

At a time where the price of everything is going through the roof, people are less likely to donate money and we're asking those organizations to do more, quite frankly. When I speak to those organizations, they don't have the capacity to do it without a massive funding increase. We're looking at organizations that - some of them don't have maintenance people. Some of them don't have direct supervision. Some of them don't have fundraisers. Some of them don't have the staff they need. Others are paying well below what people should be paid for these jobs, and yet we're telling them to do more.

That's where your next breaking point is, to be frank with you. Your next breaking point will be that the not-for-profits are just not going to be able to do this. They're not going to be able to attract staff, and the staff that they are able to attract, there'll be great turnover.

Budget season's here. My question to you is: Is there a request from your department for substantial funding to go toward these non-profits to help deal with the work they're going to have to deal with? That includes staffing, infrastructure, housing, and pay.

TRACEY TAWHEEL: Your points in terms of not-for-profits and the pressure that's on not-for-profits - absolutely, I completely agree with you on that front. As I've said repeatedly this morning, they are a critical partner of the Department of Community Services.

I think it's important to note, though, that we are not their only funder. Many of these organizations receive federal funding. They receive funding from other provincial departments. Some of them do fundraise, absolutely, but they also receive funding from a variety of sources. That is in no way to say to say that all of them are adequately resourced.

They are also supported, as I'm sure you would be aware, through the Community Sector Council of Nova Scotia. They works with all of those NGOs that are part of that council to help provide them with training opportunities, HR supports, things along those lines that can help relieve some of the burden on their shoulders.

The organizations where we have increased programming opportunities, we have likewise increased the funding available to those organizations. For example, family resource centres where we've expanded some of our programming, we have invested further funds in those organizations so that they can, in fact, deliver on those programs. We haven't asked them to step into the space without providing them with an increase from a prevention and early intervention perspective.

They always been a critical component at the community level. I think our ability to increase their funding through these prevention and early intervention investments - and I certainly can't speak to what other departments provide, nor can I speak to federal investments, but Family Resource Centres are a prime example where many of them are CAPC sites. They receive federal funding, so their funding is coming from a variety of sources. Just to be clear, we haven't asked them to take on any new programming without properly funding that increased or expansion in programming.

THE CHAIR: The time for the Liberal caucus has elapsed. The NDP caucus - Ms. Chender.

CLAUDIA CHENDER: I was actually going to ask just the same question. I think while I'm sure it may be true that some funding has increased, it's certainly not what we hear. When I would say all of us speak with community organizations, we hear that there is a drastic need for resources.

I wonder if you could later table for this committee those funding increases that have happened commensurate with new programming. I would say as a general observation that we hear government all the time talk about community partners, but we rarely hear those agencies describe themselves as partners. They often don't feel like partners. I think that's something I'm sure we will continue to talk about as we get towards the budget.

I will move right along. I know we've talked about this a little bit in the first round, but according to an FOI that we had, between September 1, 2016 and August 31, 2019, the department required placements of safety 249 times for 201 young people. Some required more than one placement. In total, these young people spent 23,940 days in hotels, houses, apartments, or cottages in the province. I'm wondering, deputy minister, if you could tell me how much the department has spent on places of safety for youth in care in the past year.

TRACEY TAWHEEL: I don't have that number at my fingertips, but I will provide it to you. I can tell you there are currently 65 children in emergency placements. Each of my earlier comments about foster care redesign - the number of children in emergency placements, because of their complex needs and because of the lack of availability of foster home situations, that has compounded and made emergency placements much more common than we would ever want them to be, hence the reason we're redesigning our foster care system.

The redesign of that system over time will have an immediate impact on reducing the number of emergency placements that are required by creating, as I said earlier, emergency receiving, which will be an absolute game changer. Also, having foster parents who are trained to support the increasingly complex needs of children who are coming into the care of the Province, either temporarily or permanently, is a fundamental piece of that as well. We need to make sure that we are placing children where they have the greatest chance of success with the appropriate foster family who have the skills and the experience to support them.

CLAUDIA CHENDER: You said temporarily or permanently coming into care. One thing that many of us have experienced at the constituency level is families with children with very complex challenges, children who need a place of safety. They are then told that they have a choice - that they can surrender their child into the care of the minister, and that child will be given care, or they can retain custody of their child and actually have much less support. Can you comment on that or speak about whether that is being contemplated in this redesign or in the services offered by your department?

TRACEY TAWHEEL: I have heard that before. That is not anything that we have ever supported frontline social workers to say to a family, just to be clear about that. I understand in the context of counselling or maybe supporting a family, on occasion perhaps the social worker makes a comment that is interpreted in that way. I in no way want to sound like I'm disparaging any family who comes forward to say, this is what was stated to me, but I will say without reservation that is not the policy of the department.

In fact, it is the opposite. Our goal is family unity wherever possible to keep families together. If we have to temporarily pull them apart, the goal is always family reunification until it is clear that it is no longer a possibility. Whenever I hear that, and I've heard it just on a handful of occasions, it's very troubling to me because it is not at all the policy of the department. It is the antithesis of why we provide the services that we do and the goal of our child welfare programming.

CLAUDIA CHENDER: I'm glad to hear that. I will tell you I have spoken to families who have received that message, so I hope that trickles down.

National research has confirmed that 20 per cent of the homeless population in Canada is comprised of youth between the ages of 13 and 24, so one in five. In a given year, there are 35,000 to 40,000 youth experiencing homelessness in Canada, maybe temporarily living in hostels, staying with friends, living in squats, or living on the streets. A high percentage of youth experiencing homelessness are also in the care, somehow or other, of child protective services.

I know that you said that numbers are tricky to come by, but do you have any numbers, or could you get them around how many youth in care in Nova Scotia are currently experiencing homelessness?

TRACEY TAWHEEL: Youth in the care of the Province to my knowledge - in the actual care of the minister - should not be experiencing homelessness because youth in the care of the minister are housed, either through a child and youth caring program, in a foster caring environment, in a kinship arrangement. I will go back, absolutely, and look. Certainly if a child is not in the care of the minister and is experiencing homelessness and they are under the age of 19, any adult who is aware of that is compelled through legislation to make a referral to the department in order for us to be able to provide supports.

Housing support workers, who are out every day working with and trying to support our homeless population, actively look for youth to ensure that either if they need to refer to the department from a child welfare perspective, that referral happens, or recognizing that there may be other needs that those individuals have. I will certainly go back and have that conversation.

THE CHAIR: Ms. Leblanc, you have 30 seconds.

SUSAN LEBLANC: I've brought this up a lot of times before, but the issue with the federal child family benefit being removed from a family when the children are removed, we brought this up with the former minister several times since 2018. Wondering if you can provide an update or tell us why the issue is still not addressed. If you run out of time, I would love you to get back to us with a letter.

[10:30 a.m.]

THE CHAIR: The time for the NDP questioning has elapsed, unfortunately. On to the PC caucus - Mr. Ritcey.

DAVE RITCEY: I'd like to learn a bit more around what supports are available for children with special needs who come into care, as well as when they age out. Could you elaborate on that?

TRACEY TAWHEEL: Prior to a child coming into care, if there is a child with special needs, we do have a Direct Family Support for Children program that is run through our Disability Support Program, so families can receive and access support through that program. It's primarily for respite for parents who have children with special needs.

If a child with special needs does come into the care of the minister, the department takes every step possible to ensure that child receives all of the appropriate intervention and support that they require, either with an appropriately-resources foster home or in a child and youth caring facility.

It really is customized and unique, depending on what the needs of that child are to ensure that child has the best possible chance of success. Often, the supports that are required are not supports that necessarily are accessible inside the Department of Community Services. It may require accessing services provided through the IWK. It may require accessing the services of a psychologist, or any number of educational perhaps interventions. Whatever a child in care needs in order to be successful, those supports are provided.

Their social worker acts as their advocate and ensures that they receive the supports they need. As I referenced earlier, if the child is in a foster care arrangement, their foster parent also plays a really pivotal role in terms of what they are observing the child's needs to be and making sure that they as well are an advocate for that child to ensure that they get the supports that they need.

I apologize, I think I've missed part of your question.

DAVE RITCEY: Basically, special needs that come into care, but also when they age out or come out of foster care.

TRACEY TAWHEEL: I apologize for that. We do have arrangements that we put in place with children as they age out of care to ensure that - I believe I referenced this earlier - that they have some supports to transition into adulthood. Those arrangements are voluntary. We have a number of them in place and put a number of them in place during COVID. We wanted to make sure that we didn't have children transitioning out of care with no supports in place, so we have quite a number of them in place now. It is something that we are looking at - what other supports are required.

An earlier comment around post-secondary, for example - ensuring that children in care see post-secondary as a really viable option for them is a conversation that needs to happen when they're younger, but that continues. That conversation needs to continue even once they have hit 19 and they technically age out. They're still very young, and by virtue of the fact that they've come into care, they have experienced trauma. There is no question. Providing them with support, guidance, and help so that they can help figure out what their path forward is, is really important. Looking at what those arrangements could entail, should entail, is something that we're actively engaged in.

DAVE RITCEY: I'm going to pass it on to my colleague Nolan Young.

THE CHAIR: Mr. Young.

NOLAN YOUNG: Along that line of questioning, deputy minister, has the Child, Youth and Family Supports division of DCS investigated ways to alter functioning, operating models, or service delivery to achieve greater efficiency?

TRACEY TAWHEEL: Yes, the department has embarked on a number of change initiatives to improve the functioning of the department. Certainly, I can't take credit for those. Many of those happened long before I became the deputy minister of the department, and there are many more under way now.

Taking a very close look at how we deliver service - I've referenced this a number of times - relieving that administrative burden in this context off the shoulders of frontline social workers is one of the key areas that we need to look at. We are overhauling our case management system to seek efficiencies with that case management system. There are a number of other initiatives we've also undertaken in terms of arriving at a greater level of efficiency and relieving some of that burden on the shoulders of, again, frontline social workers, but also of all our frontline staff.

I know we're talking about child welfare here today, but any frontline position in the Department of Community Services carries an incredible burden. Our staff are involved in the most intimate details of people's lives. We need to make sure that we support them by relieving that administrative burden: looking for efficiencies; ensuring that if we have any staff shortages anywhere, we move resources around; and ensuring that we are using technology to its maximum capacity.

All of these things we need to continually look at within the department. I'd be happy to sit down at some point and walk through the entire transformation journey that the department has gone through over the course of the last five to seven years.

NOLAN YOUNG: What are the current ways in which data regarding caseloads or time to complete cases or the resolution of cases, et cetera, is being collected and analyzed?

TRACEY TAWHEEL: The department does have an integrated case management system that allows us to track data in terms of caseloads, closing out cases, completion, et cetera. The integrated case management system helps with that.

Within the department, we also have a small team that is involved in data analytics that looks at everything from caseload numbers to every form of data you can think about that would impact our department - poverty stats, homelessness data, numbers of children in care, tracking that over time.

Every piece of data that comes into the possession of the department, and data that exists outside of our department that would be relevant for us to be aware of, the data analytics team tracks all of that. We use that data to make programmatic decisions, but also to determine if there is a need to look at redeploying resources, perhaps using our resources a little bit differently to help manage caseloads, perhaps peaks or spikes in certain areas, and then moving those resources back to their home position.

NOLAN YOUNG: Can you elaborate on anticipated changes to communications, and how this might improve things for foster parent families?

TRACEY TAWHEEL: Throughout the redesign of our foster care system, there will be ongoing and constant communication through the Federation of Foster Families of Nova Scotia that serves as a bit of a conduit out to all of the foster families that are part of the current foster care system - constant feedback going out to foster families, regular updates out to current foster families.

In the very near future, you will all see a very robust foster care recruitment campaign launch where we'll be using multiple different media platforms to reach out to potential foster families, as well as our frontline social workers, who have constant contact with foster families. Keeping them in the loop as foster care redesign rolls forward will be critically important. They serve as a really important source of trusted information for our foster families and children in their care, so it is critically important that our frontline social workers - and in fact our entire department - are aware of all of the changes that are being made.

We regularly provide updates out to the department through - I referenced it earlier - a change ambassador network and through a variety of other methods and techniques to

make sure people have all the information they need and that they know where these critical projects are at in terms of their development.

THE CHAIR: Order. Time for questioning by the PC caucus has elapsed. If the deputy minister would like to make some closing remarks, please do so now.

TRACEY TAWHEEL: I'll be very brief, just to say thank you to the committee for being interested in this topic and for doing what I know you all do every single day, which is also helping to care for and support vulnerable Nova Scotians. I believe we have a shared interest and shared goals in this area, and I understand that the questions that you pose are based on your own experiences within your constituencies. I really thank you for all the questions that you've asked.

I also really would like to thank my colleague Ms. Embrett for joining me here today. In particular, I would like to thank all of our frontline social workers, who go above and beyond every single day to provide the best possible care they can, and to send a message to them that we are listening. We are making changes. We believe in the good work that they do. Thank you very much.

THE CHAIR: Thank you. I'd just like to let the witnesses know that they are not obliged to sit here while we conduct our committee business. You are free to go.

We will now move on to committee business. I had initially intended to deal with Ms. Leblanc's motion of January 12th first - I'm seeing amendments coming forward - but we do need to make sure that we have our March 2nd meeting venue settled. I would like to do that first as a result.

The March 2nd meeting venue - we are scheduled to have a number of witnesses here. I do see a motion that has been circulated. Mr. Young, is that your motion? Would you like to move it?

NOLAN YOUNG: I move that the PAC continue in-person meetings, and when necessary to accommodate Public Health protocols, have witnesses appear virtually.

THE CHAIR: Is there any discussion on that? All those in favour? Contrary minded? Thank you.

The motion is carried.

So our next meeting will be here in person to do housing repair programs for low-income seniors. Our witnesses will appear virtually.

Now we will move on to Ms. Leblanc's motion of January 12, 2022, which is: That the subcommittee meet to draft a statement of purpose and values and to draft a motion around the Public Accounts Committee affirming a willingness to work collaboratively.

Mr. Young.

NOLAN YOUNG: I'd like to amend that motion, if the committee agrees. I move that this be the first topic in a PAC training session that's facilitated by the Auditor General, and that the PAC meet to draft a statement of purpose and values and to draft a motion around the PAC affirming its willingness to work collaboratively.

THE CHAIR: Is there any discussion on the amendment? Ms. Leblanc.

SUSAN LEBLANC: Just to clarify, the difference is that the member wants the whole committee to work on the statement instead of the subcommittee?

NOLAN YOUNG: Yes, just for clarity. At best, we've had our moments of dysfunction, I think, within this committee, is fair to say. I think if we work collaboratively, where every member is part of the training session moving forward, I think would be better than just having the subcommittee. So yes, I'd like the whole committee.
[10:45 a.m.]

THE CHAIR: Ms. Leblanc.

SUSAN LEBLANC: I think it would be good to hear from the Auditor General and see if she is willing to facilitate such a session. (Laughs) She may think it's a terrible idea.

THE CHAIR: Ms. Adair.

KIM ADAIR: Good morning, everyone. Yes, I would be pleased to assist the committee to draft a statement of purpose and values. I could provide an example, such as what P.E.I. is now using.

I think I would encourage the committee to have a separate and focused discussion regarding what's needed to ensure that the committee works collaboratively and in a nonpartisan way - for example, come up with key attributes that you feel you need when you're carrying out your meeting, what your ground rules are. From that discussion, I could assist in drafting a statement of purpose and values.

I did have the training session in January, if you recall, and laid out a number of the ideal attributes of a well-functioning Public Accounts Committee, so we could revisit that.

THE CHAIR: Ms. Leblanc.

SUSAN LEBLANC: Madam Chair, we will support the amendment. I'm also happy just to rescind my original motion, but it's probably easier just to vote on the amendment and then vote on the amended motion. We're ready to vote.

THE CHAIR: We will now vote on the amendment, which is that a statement of purpose and values and a draft of the motion around the Public Accounts Committee affirming a willingness to work collaboratively be - I have it here, but it's not a full sentence. It just says, this be the first topic. There we are - I see it later in it.

We move that this be a first topic in a PAC training session facilitated by the Auditor General, that the PAC meet to draft a statement of purpose and values and to draft a motion around the PAC affirming a willingness to work collaboratively.

We are now voting on the amendment. All those in favour? Contrary minded? Thank you.

The motion is carried.

Apparently, we're supposed to vote a second time on the amended motion. The amended motion is that this be the first topic et cetera, et cetera.

All those in favour? Contrary minded? Thank you.

The motion is carried. We will schedule that.

Mr. Young, you also had a motion from February 9th that the member for Halifax Atlantic please table any documents that indicate the completion of all government priorities will happen in 90 days as he referenced earlier. My understanding is that Mr. Maguire has in fact submitted all of those to the committee. Mr. Young, did you want to speak to this motion?

NOLAN YOUNG: Have the documents been circulated, or is it only that we're talking about the highlighted mandate letters?

THE CHAIR: My understanding was that mandate letters were requested and they have been tabled and highlighted as well. Ms. Sheehy-Richard.

MELISSA SHEEHY-RICHARD: I think that the clarity from the motion was that in quotes in Hansard, you'll see that the member had wanted the mandate letters to say that government had completion of all the priorities, which in fact the mandate letters do not say completion - just that they would work on them as priorities. There was a discrepancy in what he provided and what he said that the mandate letters said.

THE CHAIR: Mr. Maguire.

BRENDAN MAGUIRE: They're just playing word games now. The mandate letters are very clear. There were timelines put in them. There was a 90-day timeline. The mandate letters were tabled. This is just silliness. The mandate letters were asked for. There were specific timelines in the mandate letters. I did what they asked.

THE CHAIR: Mr. Young, do you want to withdraw your motion? Do you want to keep it there? What would you like?

NOLAN YOUNG: I would just ask if there's any additional documents to submit them to the committee, that's all.

THE CHAIR: If you would like to withdraw your motion. You don't want to withdraw your motion?

NOLAN YOUNG: I may have to amend my motion, but if there are any additional documents - I think where the point of clarity was, and if I may read from Hansard: Within the first 90 days of the mandate, the department will work with the Department of Economic Development and Tourism, which we are doing. I think Mr. Maguire said:

“There's a lot of work that was supposed to be done within the first 90 days, and a lot of plans that were supposed to be developed. How many of these things have been done? I mean, obviously, all of it has to be done - it's right in your mandate letter . . .”

I'm just asking that if there are any additional documents that state that all these plans must be done in the first 90 days to submit them, or whatever documents he has.

THE CHAIR: We have a motion on the floor, it has not been voted on. Mr. Maguire.

BRENDAN MAGUIRE: I'd just like to state for the record, it's not just me who is being partisan in this committee, and that this is kind of ticky-tack stuff. The mandate letters were very clear. There was a 90-day - and there are other dates. I don't know why we're wasting time debating this. This is my last comment on it, but I just want to say that this is being drawn out for partisan, political purposes.

THE CHAIR: Any further comments? The members will now vote on Mr. Young's motion of February 9th, that the member for Halifax Atlantic please table any documents that indicate the completion of all government priorities will happen in 90 days, as he referenced earlier.

Mr. Maguire has requested a recorded vote, so I will ask Ms. Langille to read the names of the committee members, and they will vote aye or nay.

[The clerk calls the roll.]

[10:51 a.m.]

YEAS

Nolan Young
Dave Ritcey
John A. MacDonald
Melissa Sheehy-Richard
Trevor Boudreau

NAYS

Hon. Brendan Maguire
Claudia Chender
Susan Leblanc
Hon. Kelly Regan

THE CLERK: For, 5. Against, 4.

THE CHAIR: The motion is carried. Mr. Maguire, you're requested to table those documents.

Is there any further discussion on anything else? Mr. Maguire.

BRENDAN MAGUIRE: Just from the clerk, I just need some clarification here. The motion that was put forward was around the mandate letters. I'm asking for advice from the clerk, not political opinions or whatever, but I was asked to submit those, which I did.

I'm just confused on what this motion means. I did send out in an email the mandate letters, and it was very clear, the information was very clear. I'm confused. For the first time in eight years on this committee I'm confused.

THE CHAIR: Really?

BREANDAN MAGUIRE: No, not really.

THE CHAIR: Ms. Langille.

KIM LANGILLE: Honestly, I'm confused. The motion talks about the completion of government priorities will happen in 90 days. That's specific in the motion. Yes, you have provided documentation. It seems as though Mr. Young isn't satisfied with the documentation that he's got, so I have to refer to Gordon to see what option is there, since this motion has been passed.

BRENDAN MAGUIRE: I don't want to waste time, but I think where we're getting a little strange here is interpretation. One side is interpreting it one way and it's not the way it was meant to be. There was a snippet that was quoted, but I had specifically referenced 90 days that was in the mandate letters. It was very clear in those mandate letters that we had submitted. I don't know. I think this is maybe a disagreement of opinion here. I don't

know if Gordon wants to - there's nothing left to submit. I could write something on a napkin and submit it, but there's literally nothing left to submit.

The member for Dartmouth North has talked about taking the partisanship out of this committee. Us doing that - and this is exactly what I think she was referring to. I think this kind of stuff is exactly what she was referring to. I could be wrong. There's nothing left to submit, so I would like to some advice from Gordon.

THE CHAIR: Mr. Hebb.

GORDON HEBB: Clearly, if the member doesn't believe he has anything to submit, he can't submit it. I don't know what I should say here, but I suspect that Mr. Young doesn't think that he has anything to submit either and is making a point. I may be misinterpreting.

THE CHAIR: Any further conversation on this? Ms. Sheehy-Richard.

MELISSA SHEEHY-RICHARD: I can comment that he wasn't asked to submit mandate letters. He was asked when he quoted that the government completion of all government priorities would happen within 90 days - that was what he spoke about. We were just looking to see where he found that proof, for clarity. That's all.

BRENDAN MAGUIRE: If you continue on in Hansard, the next statement I made was, "it's in the mandate letters," to which the government requested that I table them. There are words I want to use, but I'll use them when I go back home. This is just time-wasting, and I think they're trying to make a point, or try to make an example.

It was very clear, what I said. The response was very clear, and if you want to take a little snippet out of Hansard for political and partisan purposes, fine, but in the end, the reference - I was the one who made the reference - was to the mandate letters and the 90-day timeline. If you have an issue with the 90-day timeline, I suggest that you speak to your Premier, not me. I'm not going to be submitting anything else. I submitted what needed to be submitted, and if they want to continue to make hay out of nothing, have at it.

THE CHAIR: Any further discussion? As I've previously indicated, our next meeting is March 2nd. It will be here in the Chamber. We will be meeting on housing repair programs for low-income seniors. With that, the meeting is adjourned.

[The committee adjourned at 10:57 a.m.]