

HANSARD

NOVA SCOTIA HOUSE OF ASSEMBLY

COMMITTEE

ON

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS

Wednesday, June 1, 2022

LEGISLATIVE CHAMBER

Rising Food Cost and Food Inflation in Nova Scotia

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Public Accounts Committee

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Hon. Brendan Maguire
Claudia Chender
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In Attendance:

Kim Langille
Legislative Committee Clerk

Gordon Hebb
Chief Legislative Counsel

Kim Adair
Auditor General

WITNESSES

Department of Agriculture

Loretta Robichaud - Deputy Minister
Heather Hughes - Executive Director, Policy & Corporate Services

Department of Community Services

Tracey Taweel - Deputy Minister
Joy Knight - Executive Director, Employment Support and Income Assistance

Dalhousie University

Dr. Sylvain Charlebois - Professor of Food Distribution and Policy and Senior Director,
Agri-Food Analytics Lab
Janet Music - Research Program Coordinator, Agri-Food Analytics Lab

Feed Nova Scotia

Nick Jennery - Executive Director
Sylvia Parris-Drummond - Chair, Board of Directors
Dr. Mohammed Al-Hamdani - Director of Community Connections

Nourish Nova Scotia

Margo Riebe-Butt - Executive Director
Joy King - Principal, Uniacke District School

Nova Scotia Federation of Agriculture

Carolyn Van Den Heuvel - Executive Director



HALIFAX, WEDNESDAY, JUNE 1, 2022

STANDING COMMITTEE ON PUBLIC ACCOUNTS

9:00 A.M.

CHAIR

Hon. Kelly Regan

VICE CHAIR

Nolan Young

THE CHAIR: Order. This is the Standing Committee on Public Accounts. My name is Kelly Regan. I'm the MLA for Bedford Basin and the Chair of this committee. Just a reminder to everyone to place your phones on silent and to keep your mask on except for when you're speaking. I'm going to ask committee members to introduce themselves, beginning with the member closest to me, the member for Dartmouth South.

[The committee members introduced themselves.]

THE CHAIR: I will note that officials from the Auditor General's Office, the Legislative Counsel Office and the Legislative Committees Office are in attendance as well.

On today's agenda, we have officials with us from a variety of organizations: the Department of Agriculture, the Department of Community Services, Dalhousie University, Feed Nova Scotia, Nourish Nova Scotia, and the Nova Scotia Federation of Agriculture regarding rising food cost and food inflation here in Nova Scotia. I'm going to ask the witnesses to introduce themselves. I'm going to call on you, and you can explain who you are.

[The witnesses introduced themselves.]

THE CHAIR: I will now call on our witnesses to make opening remarks, beginning with Deputy Minister Robichaud.

LORETTA ROBICHAUD: Madam Chair, I'm pleased to be here to speak on behalf of the Department of Agriculture on food cost. With me today is Heather Hughes, Executive Director of Policy and Corporate Services.

At our department, we work with farmers, community groups, and partners to help increase the province's food supply. We develop programs, services, and policies to help farmers in rural and urban communities be more competitive and sustainable, and we promote buying local.

Part of our mandate is to increase the consumption of local food and examine policies and programs that help reduce the costs of eating healthy. Accessing locally produced, farm-fresh products is a good way to eat healthy; however, we all know that rising costs throughout the world are affecting all sectors. The pandemic brought significant supply chain issues and current global events - including Russia's invasion of Ukraine - have introduced significant volatility. Both are driving up basic living expenses for many Nova Scotians.

The challenge for agricultural producers in 2022 will be the rising cost of inputs such as fertilizer, fuel, equipment, building supplies, and more. Our department helps with their operating costs in several ways. We invest \$7.4 million annually under the Canadian Agricultural Partnership to support farmers and agriculture associations. During the pandemic, we helped coordinate arrivals and isolation requirements for temporary foreign workers for the agriculture sector.

Last fall, Minister Morrow announced a 10 per cent reduction of a producer's crop insurance premium costs for 2022. To help address labour shortages, we offer the Agriculture On-Farm Student Bursary Program. To date, \$170,000 in bursaries has been awarded. The Nova Scotia Farm Loan Board provides financing to the sector, with flexible payment schedules to support farmers through challenging situations.

We provide operational funding to Perennia to provide free advice to farmers on growing practices, disease prevention and more. We have programs to help farmers market their products locally and internationally. The Nova Scotia Clean Technology for Agriculture program provided \$5 million to the agriculture industry to help increase use of more energy-efficient technologies and lower the cost of production. In these and several other ways, our department works daily to help Nova Scotia's agriculture sector so that they can continue to produce quality local healthy foods for Nova Scotians.

Madam Chair, we are now happy to take questions from the committee.

THE CHAIR: Thank you. From DCS, Deputy Minister Taweel.

TRACEY TAWHEEL: Madam Chair, committee members, thank you for inviting me here today to talk about the rising costs of food and food inflation. As previously stated, my name is Tracey Taweel. I am the Deputy Minister of Community Services, and joining me is Joy Knight, Executive Director of Employment Supports and Income Assistance.

Food insecurity doesn't just cause hunger; it can also cause fear and anxiety. It affects physical health and well-being and can create a sense of isolation and loss of community. Rising food costs and inflation are part of an interconnected series of issues that are putting pressure on people every day. As we all know, many of the factors creating these issues are complex global problems that societies all over the world are facing. They are issues that are bigger than Nova Scotia, but even if these problems are bigger than our province, that doesn't change the fact that many Nova Scotians are deeply vulnerable to the effects, and it doesn't change the fact that we have work to do.

Tackling issues like this demands a collective response. I'm so pleased to be here with today's other witnesses, as the breadth of represented expertise demonstrates just how critical a multi-layered approach is if we are to effect real, meaningful change. At DCS, we provide a wide range of social services, frequently delivered by our partner organizations across the province.

Throughout the pandemic, we were very fortunate to have partners like Feed Nova Scotia and the Family Resource Centres. Thanks to their commitment to the communities they serve, we were able to leverage \$2.7 million in government funding to implement the COVID-19 Food Box program and reach the most vulnerable Nova Scotians who were unable to leave their homes or access food support through friends and family. Family Resource Centres also played a critical role in food access during the pandemic, working with our department and the SchoolsPlus team to reach food-insecure families.

We have continued to work with these important partners. This past March, in response to rising food prices, we provided another \$1 million to Feed Nova Scotia to distribute among their food banks, and \$75,000 to Family Resource Centres. We also supplied \$200,000 to local food banks and organizations across the province that aren't part of the Feed Nova Scotia network. This included partnering with United Way branches in Cape Breton, Halifax and Pictou County.

These organizations have strong ties with their respective communities, and they were able to devise strategies to distribute the funds quickly and efficiently. We have also funded partners to create community-led food hubs in Eskasoni and East Preston. These two pilots are part of the department's efforts to ensure culturally appropriate services are available, taking a community-based approach to destigmatizing access to food.

Poverty, income inequality, and systemic racism are some of the fundamental drivers of food insecurity that create barriers to access. Recognizing that vulnerable Nova Scotians need many different types of supports, there has been a variety of initiatives

announced over the last few months. These include increasing the Nova Scotia Child Benefit to \$16.6 million annually; providing Income Assistance clients and their family members with a one-time, \$150 support to help manage rising costs, representing a total additional investment of \$5.3 million; and investments in culturally responsive youth preventative programming to help prevent the cycle of intergenerational poverty.

We are also working closely with colleagues across the provincial government to provide a holistic approach to improving affordability. We know there is much more to do, and we are continuing to work towards identifying and implementing further measures to help Nova Scotians.

THE CHAIR: Mr. Jennery.

NICK JENNERY: Thank you, Madam Chair and members of the Public Accounts Committee. I would like to acknowledge the attendance of our board chair, Sylvia Parris-Drummond and Dr. Mohammed Al-Hamdani, who is the author of many of the statistics that were providing to the committee.

I've been living in my car since last Fall. I work and use most of my money to run the car to keep warm. I don't have any food.

I'm mentally exhausted, calling churches for support with my power bill and fighting with the power company. I'm not sleeping at night worrying about my children.

I'm a single father and a working professional, but I am having trouble providing adequate food for my kids.

These are just three Nova Scotians among the thousands who have reached out to us during this past year. Thank you for the opportunity to be here to advocate on their behalf. Thousands of our neighbours, your constituents, were food insecure long before the current rise in food costs, and today's cost of living has deepened the crisis. The problem isn't just that food has gone up. It's that income hasn't kept pace.

Almost twice as many people visited a food bank for the first time in the first quarter of 2022, compared to the same period last year. We've provided background information that includes more data on food bank visit trends and highlights from the recent survey that we conducted amongst those seeking support. More Nova Scotians are being pushed deeper into food insecurity. If you're Black or Indigenous, you are three times more likely to be food insecure.

Nova Scotia remains the province with the highest food insecurity rates in the country. The millions of kilograms of food we distribute are simply a band-aid. You have the power to create bold and life-changing policy.

People are food insecure because they don't have enough income. Our recent survey found that 80 per cent of food bank clients identified lack of income and cost of living as the major reasons behind their food insecurity. The increasing inflation calls for critical policy levers to reconcile social assistance and wage.

[9:15 a.m.]

Government should increase income assistance rates and regularly index them to match inflation. We should support workers by setting higher minimum wage closer to a living wage to enable low-income Nova Scotians to cope with the increasing cost of living.

We are in an affordable housing crisis. Low-income renters are facing increased risk of poverty, food insecurity, and homelessness. Pass legislation that recognizes housing as a human right and create an equity-based affordable housing strategy with timelines and targets.

People are choosing between food and medication, with a devastating impact on their health and a strain on our healthcare system. Put money back in people's pockets by waiving or reducing the annual deductible amount after the 20 per cent co-pay is applied in the Family Pharmacare Program.

As the urgent need for support continues to rise, so does the expectation that charities like Feed Nova Scotia will continue to meet it. This is simply not sustainable. We need government to tackle the root causes and ensure every Nova Scotian can meet their needs and live a life of dignity and opportunity. Thank you.

THE CHAIR: Thank you, Mr. Jennery. Ms. Riebe-Butt.

MARGO RIEBE-BUTT: Thank you for inviting me today. Nourish Nova Scotia is a provincial non-profit supporting the nutritional health and well-being of children and youth. We have core funding from the Government of Nova Scotia to work with schools and communities to support healthy food environments. The core funding also provides us the ability to leverage funding from other sources to increase investments in school food.

Joining me today is Joy King, the principal of Uniacke District School located in the provincial district of Sackville-Uniacke. Joy will be here to provide first voice for any of your questions.

In advance of this meeting, Nourish Nova Scotia reached out to our regional education contacts to ask them how rising costs are impacting their school food programs.

We heard that schools are running out of their food budgets earlier in the year for three main reasons: the cost of food has increased significantly, the number of students accessing the program has increased exponentially, and the pandemic has caused a shift in how breakfast programs are delivered, featuring more pre-packaged items, which are more costly. Because of convenience and many other factors, many programs have not shifted back to pre-pandemic models.

The impacts are significant. Children are still going hungry as programs may run less days per week or end early in the year as budgets expire. The variety of foods offered have decreased, especially fresh foods like vegetables and fruits, and in addition to breakfast, the need for a lunch program has grown in urgency.

School food programs have never been fully funded, and they rely on volunteers and fundraising. We facilitate a farm-to-school fundraiser called Nourish Your Roots to help. It has also been impacted by a rising cost. This year, we had to invoke an interrupter-style clause in order to pay more to the farmers to help offset their increased cost of production and delivery. This will impact the number of boxes sold, the number of schools participating, and ultimately, the money they raise to sustain their school food programs.

You may be aware that the federal government has committed to developing and funding a cost-shared, Canada-wide school food program. This commitment is outlined in two ministerial mandate letters issued this past December. At the provincial level, we need cross-government collaboration and co-operation to successfully engage with the federal government to make this commitment a reality.

In Nova Scotia, school food falls under the purview of the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development and the Department of Health and Wellness, but at the federal level, the school food ministerial mandate letters are in the departments of Families, Children and Social Development - I guess which is related to DCS here - and Agriculture and Agri-food Canada. We're requesting a cross-government committee be struck to begin negotiations, and we're here to help.

THE CHAIR: Thank you. Ms. Van Den Heuvel, I think you're going to speak on behalf of the Federation of Agriculture.

CAROLYN VAN DEN HEUVEL: Thank you, Madam Chair. I'm very pleased to be here to represent the Nova Scotia Federation of Agriculture. NSFA represents over 90 per cent of all primary agriculture production in Nova Scotia, which is just under 2,000 registered farm businesses, the majority of which are run by Nova Scotian families.

Our vision is a prosperous and sustainable future for Nova Scotia farms and farmers. Supporting the development of strong, healthy communities is at the forefront of our operations, including the need to facilitate access to local, safe, and healthy products

while prioritizing and protecting the mental health and well-being of our farmers and their families, which means profitable and sustainable businesses.

When we talk here today about the impacts of rising food costs and food inflation, it's important that we don't lose sight of the fact that farmers and their loved ones are absolutely impacted by the significant economic and social challenges our province is facing as a result of global events. Our farmers are incredibly concerned about the cost of food for many reasons, but also because they're consumers, too. They're consumers, as well as producers, and inflation is having a dramatic impact on the cost of production.

The cost to produce food is rapidly increasing, and profits are not. It is our position that a long-term solution to ensuring safe, healthy, and affordable food, and food security for Nova Scotians, is a strategic and sustainable investment in our agriculture industry. After all, agriculture is the epitome of essential. We produce food and products that are vital to human life, and this access to food is directly correlated to successful outcomes overseen by various government departments, including health care, education, and social services.

This is why the NSFA strongly advocates for a food and agriculture lens to be applied to all policy and programs developed by the government. The one industry we quite literally cannot live without has to be kept top of mind as decisions are made. We need to be part of the solution in growing our province and growing our economy and ensuring food security for our communities.

THE CHAIR: Dr. Charlebois.

DR. SYLVAIN CHARLEBOIS: I'm grateful to be part of the discussion, along with other great organizations that you've invited also today.

The Agri-Food Analytics Lab was created four years ago to address Canada's data deficit, looking at both ends of the food continuum, and there is a deficit when it comes to data. We often fly in the dark in Canada. Case in point: we have no idea how much food consumed by Nova Scotians is actually produced in Nova Scotia. The Province is certainly looking into that right now, but most provinces in Canada don't know what the ratio is, and that's a problem.

There are many circumstances where we just don't know, we don't have the data, and that's why we created the lab in the first place. Over the last two-three years, we've worked with the Bank of Canada, the Auditor General of Canada as well, the Competition Bureau, Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada, the CFIA, and we've also worked with six other provinces in the country. Unfortunately, I must say that I fail to see any evidence our province really has food security as a real priority.

Let me give you a few examples. In the last several years, since 2006, we've lost 28 per cent of our farms in our province, and the average gain is about 16 per cent. We're using less farmland. There's little or no processing that occurs in our province, which is really the anchor piece of a value chain, a food supply chain. We've lost a lot of processing in our region and in our province, which is quite unfortunate. This is something that needs to be addressed.

The one message I could give to the committee in my opening remarks is, I actually think that Nova Scotia needs a comprehensive food autonomy strategy. This would include three axes: one, consumption of local foods produced and processed in our province; two, we need to look at economic development in rural Nova Scotia in particular, and that's where processing comes in, and farming as well; and third, sustainability.

This is really a competitive advantage that we have in our province, sustainability. I've worked with different groups, and we do have a competitive advantage. Embedded in that strategy, we could actually value a competitive advantage.

THE CHAIR: It is now 9:24 a.m. We are going to begin the questioning with the caucuses. Each caucus will have 20 minutes, and just so folks know, if they're speaking, answering a question, and the 20 minutes elapse, I interrupt you. I'm not being rude, it's just trying to be fair with the different caucuses.

With that in mind, we are now going to begin with the Liberal caucus. The time will end in 20 minutes. Mr. Maguire.

HON. BRENDAN MAGUIRE: Lots of questions, so no preamble today. Nova Scotia inflation right now - as of June 1, 2022 - is 7.1 per cent, the fourth-highest in the country. The food inflation rate is actually the second-highest in the country at 9.8 per cent. Energy costs up 31 per cent; shelter up 7.8 per cent - that's nationwide, but I would argue that the shelter rate in Nova Scotia is much higher than 7.8 per cent; transportation, 13.6 per cent; fresh fruit, 10 per cent; meat, 10.1 per cent; pasta, 19.6 per cent. We can go on and on

In comparison, we have the lowest quarter-over-quarter wage and salary seasonal adjustments, so we are the lowest in the country in wage percentage change - an increase at 2.3 per cent.

My question would be to Mr. Jennery, who we know is one of the organizations on the front line. We're seeing food costs skyrocket and shelter costs skyrocket. That would impact organizations like yours. The wages in Nova Scotia are the lowest increase in all of Canada. What kind of impact are you seeing? What kind of impact are you witnessing first-hand with Feed Nova Scotia?

NICK JENNERY: Thank you for your question. We see it on a number of fronts. One of the metrics that we regularly monitor are the number of new clients who are registered with a food bank. Typically, this runs around 3 to 5 per cent. It's now running about 6 to 7 per cent are new clients. If you look specifically at HRM and CBRM, currently it's at the 8 to 10 per cent. That's a lot.

If we look at the Food Box program that was generously supported by the Department of Community Services, between 20 to 30 per cent of the recipients of the food box are brand new clients. It's an indicator. If you look at Feed Nova Scotia, every time diesel goes up a penny, it adds a thousand dollars to our operating costs. That's a very real cost for us.

When I started seven years ago, we bought no food. We had enough food to distribute. Now we're spending north of a million dollars in order to just keep up, so the impact is a lot.

I would finish by saying that the greatest impact is the impact that we don't know. It's the hidden hungry. It's the people who feel disconnected, isolated, and are just quietly suffering. That's what I'm most concerned about.

BRENDAN MAGUIRE: During the last sitting, the budget sitting, we kept hearing the number \$13 billion. Any time the Premier or the Minister of Finance and Treasury Board were questioned on anything for help for Nova Scotians, they talked about this historic budget of \$13 billion.

What we do know is that realistically, it was just a small percentage increase in health care and really nothing - well, I shouldn't say "nothing" - 0 per cent increase to income assistance rates in Nova Scotia. What they liked to tout as a solution was a \$150 one-time payment to people on income assistance.

Again, my question would be to Mr. Jennery. They said this was a fantastic program. So \$150 was put in the hands of the people who needed it most. Did you see a decrease in people using your services because of that one-time \$150 payment from income assistance?

NICK JENNERY: I would say it's very difficult to isolate the impact of any one initiative on the number of people going to a food bank, a shelter, or a meal program. I would say that when the government recently - and my colleague mentioned \$1 million that was given to Feed Nova Scotia - we distributed \$997,000 of that to all of those front-line agencies that we support. That said, they have a finite capacity to help. Many of those organizations, even if you give them money, are staffed by aging volunteers with no succession plans. Not all of them, but some of them.

I would come back to say that we continue to see a rising number of people coming to food banks, asking for help, going to shelters, going to meal programs. Specifically, maybe I could just ask my colleague, Dr. Mohammed Al-Hamdani, who's done deeper stats on that.

[9:30 a.m.]

THE CHAIR: Dr. Al-Hamdani.

DR. MOHAMMED AL-HAMDANI: Thank you. The pressure is real, and the pressure is up. Just to zoom in on some of the more recent numbers, Nick had mentioned the increase in the number of new clients that we've seen. If you look at the first quarter of 2022 separately, about 13 per cent of all the clients were new clients, and if you compare that to the first quarter of 2021, that was about seven per cent of the clients who were new clients.

We're certainly seeing more clients who didn't use our services before, and that's because more people are being pushed down to the poverty line. We're starting to see larger families accessing our services more. If you look at the last six months, particularly for households that contain five or more individuals in the household, those who visited our member food banks in the past six months visited them 30 per cent more frequently compared to smaller-size household counterparts.

The pressure has been up, and it has been steadily increasing for the past year. I would say that the past six months - more particularly the past three months - have been the period where we've seen the highest pressure.

BRENDAN MAGUIRE: I'm not going to put words in your mouth, but what I would say is this \$150 increase that the Progressive Conservative government has touted as this great saviour for all - statistically it shows that it hasn't done really anything.

I mean, it's helped temporarily for maybe one load of groceries. I don't know how many people with a family of four or five going into the grocery store only spend \$150. I don't know how many people with a family of four or five have a power bill of \$150. A lot of times when we hear government speak of these programs, it's good to actually see what's happening on the ground and hearing today that more needs to be done.

I guess my question would be to Dr. Mohammed - I apologize, I'm not going to try to butcher your last name. When we see the income levels stagnant and when we see income assistance rates stagnant - I've talked to a lot of economists and a lot of people who are experts in this area and they said that essentially, you're taking a wage cut because your buying power is decreasing.

What are you seeing statistically around the cost of inflation going up, the cost of everything going up, and the wages staying stagnant, and what do you think the impact on not increasing the month-over-month income assistance rate has on individuals who were already struggling?

MOHAMMED AL-HAMDANI: I think that's a straightforward correlation. The strength of it needs to be looked at more carefully, but the less income an individual has - whether it's income assistance or earning from a low-paying job, or anything of that sort - the less valuable it becomes. Because of increased inflation without incremental increases per month or per year, the much harder the individual has of a time to be able to pay not only for food, but medication, housing, and other necessities, for sure.

One thing that we've noticed was the periods that correlate with CERB increases have been the periods where we've seen the initial drop in food bank visits. That's one of the indications that an increase in income supports for Nova Scotians and non-Nova Scotians tends to correlate with less usage of food bank services across the board. It's certainly important, and if we look at different surveys, including ours, when you ask an individual what they think is the most contributing factor to food insecurity, income will be on top of the list regardless of where you ask a question.

BRENDAN MAGUIRE: Dr. Mohammed, I'm glad that you said that, especially the CERB part of it, because in the last legislative session, we heard the Minister of Community Services saying that this isn't all about money, that money is not going to solve the issues. We heard the Premier downgrade the low-income and minimum-wage workers in this province. We heard the Minister of Finance and Treasury Board say, if you're struggling to get by, there are lots of jobs out there - get another job.

You just said that you saw essentially a decrease when CERB was introduced. In your opinion, what impact does increasing those monthly resources have on low-income, middle-income, and working-class individuals in Nova Scotia?

MOHAMMED AL-HAMDANI: As I said, the more income an individual has through income assistance or through a job, the less dependent they would be on food bank services or any type of food charity. This is why one of our main recommendations, understanding that increasing income assistance amounts significantly is a major challenge to do all at once, is to consider indexing income assistance to inflation as a minimum.

BRENDAN MAGUIRE: One of the things we heard the Progressive Conservative government talk about recently is the unemployment rate, that it's been the lowest since 1976. My question would be to Nourish Nova Scotia, to Margo. You're seeing a lot of people take advantage of your programs. A lot of those individuals are single moms. A lot of those individuals are working-class families who don't have the time to seek out new jobs, who can't afford internet usage, can't afford the things that we need, can't afford cell

phones, cannot afford a vehicle. These are the essential things we need now to get jobs in Nova Scotia.

When you hear politicians talk about unemployment rates and lots of jobs - you're seeing those individuals on the ground. What kind of opportunities do you think they have day-to-day after they drop their kids off at school or if they're sitting at home worrying about paying their bills and feeding? What kind of opportunities do you think they have to actually make a sudden career change or go back to school or things like that? Are they actually thinking about that? Maybe that could be to you or to Nick - whoever wants to take that.

MARGO RIEBE-BUTT: I'll give it a go. The first thing I'd like to say is children come to school hungry for many reasons, and no food in the house is certainly one factor.

To your point about busy parents, anybody here who is a parent who is trying to get kids out to school in the morning understands the chaos that ensues. Some families, they may work early shifts. Look at our health care workers and what time they're in. Kids are often left as turnkey kids to fend for themselves, and quite honestly, it's a lot nicer to go to your school, go to the breakfast program, sit with a friend, and enjoy a meal. There are a lot of social and mental health benefits to that. That's what I can speak to. I don't think there's room in many people's day for more when they have a family.

To your point about single parents, I had the privilege of having a teacher speak at an event I did many years ago, and she happened to be the child of a single mom. She said because of her school's breakfast program, her mother could afford to send her with a lunch. It's not always obvious. Her mother worked, they had a home, she had a good upbringing, but there wasn't enough money for everything.

School food programs can alleviate. They're not an answer to poverty, but they certainly level the playing field.

BRENDAN MAGUIRE: This will just be a quick yes or no answer, and I'm going to throw this out to everyone who is on the front line here who's working in the non-profit sector. Especially during COVID-19, I don't know how you were able to do it. I know a lot of people in that industry now who are unfortunately walking away, because it took such a heavy toll on them.

My question is to Dr. Al-Hamdani, Nick Jennery, Margo - I always say your last name wrong; I'm terrible with last names - Janet Music, and anyone else who is not government related. Are low-income, working-class, and middle-class Nova Scotians better off today than they were three months ago? We know the housing crisis has been around for quite a while and everybody's had a hand in that. But we're seeing record inflation, food costs, energy costs. We see Nova Scotia Power is now asking for a 10-per-cent increase, year over year.

Are Nova Scotians better off today than they were three months ago? We'll start with Feed Nova Scotia. Just a yes or no.

NICK JENNERY: Based on the numbers that we're seeing, I would say no.

MARGO RIEBE-BUTT: Based on the increases that we see in program usage, no.

JANET MUSIC: Based on the cost of food since December and its rise, I would say no.

JOY KING: Based on the increase of use of our food programs in schools, I would say no.

MOHAMMED AL-HAMDANI: No.

SYLVIA PARRIS-DRUMMOND: Thinking from our commitment around policy advocacy to address food insecurity and what we've found, no.

BRENDAN MAGUIRE: I swear that wasn't planned, but that worked out. It was great. Everybody had a different reason why, and that's scary. We just had a "historic budget" from the Progressive Conservative Government of Nova Scotia that was supposed to deal with homelessness - \$30 million for homelessness.

We're hearing announcements around government giving provincial land away for pennies on the dollar. I know that one of those pieces of land is in Herring Cove, where I live - off Village Road. I can tell you, those will not be affordable homes - oceanfront property that government's about to give away. I challenge anyone in the not-for-profit sector to tell your clients to go get a house on Village Road on the ocean, because government's about to build you some affordable housing.

I'll ask whoever wants to take this on. Where is the disconnect between our front-line services - the people who are working so hard - and what government is telling us today that people are better off, that these programs are lifting people out of poverty, and that they are dealing with this issue.

I like the stats, so I'm going to go to Mr. Jennery and then to Dr. Al-Hamdani. Where is the disconnect?

NICK JENNERY: I would say simply that you cannot look at food insecurity as a single issue. The people who are getting help from food banks, shelters, and meal programs do not live single-issue lives. The cumulative impact of all that is what we're witnessing and is what we're trying to solve.

[9:45 a.m.]

MOHAMMED AL-HAMDANI: Again, it's all going back to the grassroots factors that impact food insecurity. Food insecurity is not food distribution. I am going to mention a couple of stats from a recent survey we conducted with just under 400 individuals from our network. These are all individuals who accessed one of our programs. About 85 per cent of those say that they spend more than 30 per cent of their income on housing. That's considered unaffordable housing.

If you ask individuals about their prescription use, for instance - which is something that we heard a lot about from our food bank members - you would get the answer that about 50 per cent of respondents said that they didn't fill or collect a prescription for their medication, or skipped a dose in the last 12 months because they don't have enough money. Also, that 56 per cent specifically said that they had to sacrifice expenditure on food to pay for prescription drugs. That's, again, to Nick's point . . .

THE CHAIR: Sorry, order. I was so busy writing down what you were saying that I messed up there. My apologies to the committee members. Over to Ms. Leblanc and the NDP caucus.

SUSAN LEBLANC: I'm going to just start our questions and then hand it over to my colleague, but I just wanted to first say to Mr. Jennery: I really appreciate your opening comments and the work that you and your team are doing at Feed Nova Scotia. I know you won't mind me saying that you being here and what you've said ultimately points to policy change that must happen so that you don't have a job anymore. We don't want you to have this job, excuse me (Laughter). I know you agree with me.

As the MLA for Dartmouth North, which actually has some of the highest rates of food insecurity, unemployment, use of income assistance programs, and the SIA programs, and housing insecurity and housing instability, folks who come into my office, the folks whom we are helping in our office every day, fit this exactly, what you're talking about: how it's not just a single issue for them, food insecurity.

It's the whole kit and caboodle, and it goes much further beyond what we're talking about today. It's also about mental health, it's also about primary care, and access to healthy food is a really good way of staying out of a primary care physician's office, right? It's all connected, and we're failing people deeply in this province. I really appreciate, Mr. Jennery, your laundry list of the policies that we need to change.

I guess my question is actually for Ms. Taweel, because I agree with what Mr. Jennery is saying, and I want to know when the Department of Community Services is going to do a permanent increase in rates, and when is it going to index rates to the rate of inflation?

TRACEY TAWHEEL: As the member and as all members would be aware, the department cannot unilaterally make decisions about increasing rates or making changes that are linked into the provincial overall budget. Those decisions are made on an annual basis, sometimes throughout the year as well, but those decisions are taken into the context of all government expenditures. The department can't unilaterally just make a decision around increasing income assistance rates or any other financial supports that the department provides.

SUSAN LEBLANC: Understood. So then can you tell me: Did you ask for that in your submissions for this past budget? Did you make that request of the Treasury Board and of the overall budget, and if not, how come, and if not, will you do it next year?

TRACEY TAWHEEL: As members would be aware, budget submissions are confidential, so I cannot share with the committee the elements that the Department of Community Services, or any other department, may have submitted for the consideration of government.

I think it is fair to say, however, that all departments are very aware of the needs of those they serve, and work diligently within the processes that are laid out for us to put forward asks and requests that make sense for the constituencies that we are all privileged to serve. I can't share exactly what the department may have submitted for consideration of government, either in the last budget cycle or any previous budget cycle.

SUSAN LEBLANC: Do you think it's a good idea to index rates to inflation?

TRACEY TAWHEEL: I think there are a number of factors to be considered with regard to indexing. It is a conversation that's been had for many, many years, and if we could turn back the clock, wouldn't it be great? If when income assistance was created, it had been indexed at that point in time, or more regularized increases perhaps had been built in.

What I would say is, we can't look at indexing income assistance rates as the only solution. We need to look at all of the program offerings, and we need to consider income assistance rates in the context of all supports that are provided and look at what makes the most sense to provide the most appropriate level of support for individuals who need that support.

SUSAN LEBLANC: Just to clarify, do you mean within your department?

TRACEY TAWHEEL: I mean within the Department of Community Services, but Community Services doesn't exist as an island in and of itself. There are other supports that come through the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, for example, and my colleague at the Department of Agriculture.

What I would say is, for the first time, I think, we are working very horizontally. I've mentioned that at this committee before. We work very horizontally across all departments, recognizing that this issue is not solely an issue for the Department of Community Services to tackle: It is an issue that all departments need to participate in helping to solve, all of government.

SUSAN LEBLANC: I'm just going to ask you one more question about this. I do understand, and I think you know that I understand that. That's why I'm saying to Mr. Jennery that, yes, all of the list of things, it's across departments.

I do want to ask about the transformation that your department underwent in the last five to seven years. It was touted as the great transformation, and we still are at a place after transformation is essentially complete where some clients are marginally better off than they were, but, of course, with this rising cost, it's negligible.

Was that investment in transformation a good investment? Does there need to be more transformation? Did the transformation work extend to other departments? Were other departments figured into that huge investment in policy change?

TRACEY TAWHEEL: You're right, the Department of Community Services did embark on a significant transformation exercise long before I became the deputy minister of the department. I would say that the transformation really was very long overdue. The department had not transformed, if you will, for many, many years.

I guess to answer the first part of your question, was transformation a good investment: 100 per cent, it was a good investment. Is transformation over? Absolutely not. I would say as long as I have the privilege to be the deputy minister of the department, we are never going to stop transforming. We are nowhere near where we need to be. There is a lot more work that needs to happen. Has there been change in the department? One hundred per cent. There's change on the front line, there's change within our program divisions.

There's a lot more change to do. We are talking about a very large department that serves a large percentage of clients, and it is incumbent upon us to be responsive to their needs and to continue to look at our policies and our programs to make sure that we are supporting them in the best possible way. We don't talk about transformation any longer, because it is part of the way we function and attempt to be responsive to the needs of those whom we serve.

The final part of your question, I believe, was: Were other departments factored into the transformation? The answer to that would be yes. Again, that work needs to and must continue, but I can tell you, when we're having conversations about challenging issues like poverty, like homelessness - no longer do my colleagues around the table just

turn and look to me or someone who occupies this seat for the solution. We control some of the levers. We don't control them all, nor should we.

THE CHAIR: Ms. Chender.

CLAUDIA CHENDER: These are a lot of people, and we could have more. We could have the Department of Labour, Skills and Immigration here, we could have the Department of Finance and Treasury Board here. I think your opening statements were really helpful in highlighting the multi-faceted aspect of this issue - wages in particular, as my colleague just pointed out in the context of social assistance, but as I think many of you pointed out more generally. People need more money to buy their own food, ultimately, and that crosses departments, as we know.

I want to go back to Dr. Charlebois, and ask about the food autonomy strategy. In particular, I think the cost of food may at some point be secondary to the availability of food, period. Those two things intersect, we know.

I want to ask Dr. Charlebois in particular - and maybe if Ms. Van Den Heuvel wanted to comment on this afterwards because I think there's an intersection in the comments you were both making - about this idea of a rural economic development strategy or lens that's ag-focused. We heard about the loss of land. We heard about the lack of processing facilities. We heard about the loss of farms.

I want to ask both of you to comment on what we could do now. What could the government do to shore up that food security in those areas? What is the intersection between that and the affordability questions that we're talking about?

SYLVAIN CHARLEBOIS: I appreciate the question. In the last half hour, the discussion has been around food affordability and how do we actually tool Nova Scotians better to deal with food inflation, which is actually quite important, of course. But at the end of the day, for the longer term, we need to think about our agri-food economy. Let's face it: we have a vulnerable agri-food economy in Nova Scotia. We're far away from major centres. That applies to other Maritime provinces, and that needs to be addressed.

When I talk about a food autonomy strategy, we need to think about production capacity - producing food for ourselves in an open economy. For example, you can't possibly generate any economies of scale producing, say, tomatoes in the Valley for Nova Scotians only - for 1 million people. Tomatoes will be too expensive, so you have to think about exports. You have to think about other markets - northeast United States, Europe, et cetera.

Quebec is the only province with a food autonomy strategy. The result of that is that Quebecers actually have access to affordable local foods. It is heavily promoted. My suggestion to the committee is to think about heavily promoting Nova Scotia food to Nova

Scotians to really encourage more companies to get into that food space as much as possible. Right now, it's missing. There is enthusiasm, but very marginally, unfortunately.

[10:00 a.m.]

As you do that, at the end of the day, you increase also some food processing that is really anemic in our province. We've lost a lot of processing plants in the last few decades. We haven't thought about that anchor to really build our economy in our province.

If you have a strong food processing sector in our province, it is much easier to support farmers. It's also much easier to service a market that is highly vulnerable right now.

CAROLYN VAN DEN HEUVEL: I think it's a large question to answer, and I think we need to look at it from both a short-term and a long-term perspective. Right now, we know that it looks like our farmers are facing one of the highest planting seasons that we've seen in decades. On a day like today, they're out in the fields making that investment.

I think what we need to ensure is that currently - in this moment, in the short term - that we also are aware of the risks that farmers are facing so that we don't further erode that food production in Nova Scotia, so ensuring that we have programs and policies in place in the short term to survive some of the challenges that we're seeing faced on farms today.

I think that the other piece is recognizing the significant risk that's involved in agriculture. We know that common saying, "we're dependent on six inches of topsoil and the hope that it rains," but there are also a lot of other factors that come into play. As we look at that strategy and look at the need for investment into the agriculture community, I think looking at risk management programs to ensure that there are supports in place for farmers in taking that development in growing.

We look at having a decrease in farms over the number of years, so we also need to be looking at opportunities to invest in new entrants, whether those are folks who are new to Nova Scotia, whether they are folks within a family farm looking to take over - so making sure that we're facilitating that.

Lastly, on the processing piece, I think the reality is that we have to recognize that we're in an integrated food system. When we're talking about an investment in agriculture, we also need to ensure we're looking at the entire food system through distribution to processing. I think that collaboration across groups and across that food system network is essential to see something like a food strategy be successful.

CLAUDIA CHENDER: I wish we had more time. I think one place where that intersection of availability and local food and affordability is happening is in the school

food conversation. I'm really glad that Ms. Riebe-Butt is here as part of her swan song tour. I want to thank you for your service to the community in that role.

I thought that was really interesting, your suggestion and your pointing out that in the federal space. It's actually different departments that have these ministerial mandates than in the provincial government. My own sense is that we can't rely on volunteers for school food. We need a fully funded school food program in Nova Scotia. Our caucus has supported that for a long time. No, it won't solve the problem, but yes, it will go a long way. If you talk to educators, they'll also tell you about the other values of having kids in school who have enough to eat, particularly at lunchtime, which we don't now.

I guess I want to ask Ms. Taweel: Is there action on establishing a table or a conversation with your federal counterparts and other deputy ministers, I assume at the social deputy ministers table, around school food and making that a reality here?

TRACEY TAWHEEL: As I believe members would be aware, in Minister MacFarlane's mandate letter, our department was tasked with leading horizontal efforts around addressing child poverty. We're looking at a number of potential initiatives, and certainly food in schools is one topic that we are actively discussing with colleagues both federally and provincially.

CLAUDIA CHENDER: How much time do I have?

THE CHAIR: You have a minute and a half.

CLAUDIA CHENDER: Okay, hopefully we can return to that. I'm going to take that minute and a half and just sort of set the table for another question on this, which is school food.

So what have we been talking about? We've been talking about wages. We've been talking about food security. We've been talking about child poverty. All of these issues intersect in school food. If we had a funded school food program in Nova Scotia - ideally through several orders of government - children would be less hungry, farmers would sell more food, and people would have more food literacy.

We know in lots of schools - and I hope we can ask our administrator here this question - that there is more literacy around healthy food when there are school food programs run that particularly emphasize local procurement. Cafeterias are not built in all schools. Many of them are leased out to private companies. If we could reclaim those spaces, if we could have good jobs, if we could have people making food, that's part of the care economy, which is so vital to our future. I think it would make a huge difference.

I know I'm preaching to the choir over here, but I'm sort of trying to tie up some of what I'm hearing in terms of all these threads and to just emphasize - I could do what

my colleague Mr. Maguire did and go around and say, “Do you all agree, yes or no?” but I’m going to hope that the answer is yes.

I don’t want to cut anyone off, so I’ll yield the rest of my time and hopefully we can return to this.

THE CHAIR: Order. The time for the NDP questions has elapsed. We will now move to Mr. Boudreau.

TREVOR BOUDREAU: Thank you all for coming today. This is certainly an important topic and one that we’re all hearing about in our constituencies.

When COVID-19 started in March of 2020, my office had to shut down - I’m a chiropractor by trade. I’m not one who sits by and does nothing, so I looked to community organizations to ask, how can I help you, I want to volunteer. One of those organizations happened to be the local food bank. Part of my job with volunteering at the local food bank was unloading the Feed Nova Scotia truck that came every week.

I can tell you that that service was well utilized, and our community continues to be, and we’re very blessed and thankful for all the work that’s done there. Some wonderful people delivering the food for us.

It was fascinating, in a sense. At that time, there were a lot of businesses, like restaurants, that were closed, so at that time we were getting donations from the restaurants and the agriculture community that were coming to the food banks. It was incredible. We actually had to find extra spaces to store some of the food that we had. We were very fortunate that the municipal government at the time was able to do that for us, but I can tell you the food bank has continued to be a very important component in our region, and we’re very pleased with the work Feed Nova Scotia has done.

With that being said - and I’ve kind of gone on a little bit of a rant - we know that local food banks are crucial to combatting food insecurity in our communities. I wanted to ask maybe Deputy Minister Taweel: what are we doing to ensure that all of our food banks can continue to operate and provide communities with this important support?

TRACEY TAWHEEL: As I referenced in my opening remarks, during COVID-19, we did provide investments through our partner in Feed Nova Scotia to ensure that the network of food banks that are part of the Feed Nova Scotia family, I would say, received additional funding to support those most in need. We also provided funding for the home delivery food box program and provided funding to food banks that are not part of the Feed Nova Scotia network.

Most recently, in March of this year, we also provided Feed Nova Scotia with \$1 million to distribute. As my colleague Mr. Jennery has referenced, every penny went out

the door to the networks of food banks right across this province, and \$200,000 was provided to food banks that are outside of the Feed Nova Scotia network.

In addition to that, Family Resource Centres play a really important role at the community level, and sometimes families can find their way to a Family Resource Centre versus a food bank or may utilize both of those options in their community. During COVID-19, we provided additional funding to Family Resource Centres for food, but also for other essentials that families might be in need of, and most recently also provided a \$75,000 investment to Family Resource Centres.

I would close my response by saying we recognize the incredibly important role that organizations like Feed Nova Scotia and Family Resource Centres play in our province, and have ongoing conversation and very positive working relationships with all of those partners and recognize the really important role that they play, and work hard to be as responsive as we can as their needs arise.

TREVOR BOUDREAU: Your opening remarks had mentioned some of that. I just wanted to reiterate and highlight some of it, and maybe back to you, deputy minister, or to Ms. Knight, who's there with you: MLAs are hearing and we know that people are struggling with the issue of affordability right now.

Can you discuss how measures that were in the budget, or some measures that were done before the budget, are working to make life a little more affordable for individuals and families, and how are people benefiting from these measures?

TRACEY TAWHEEL: I will start, and then perhaps my colleague Joy Knight may want to provide some further comments.

Perhaps I will focus on the Nova Scotia Child Benefit and the increase that was in the most recent budget. As members would be aware, there was a significant increase in the most recent budget to support those families and their children who are in receipt of the Nova Scotia Child Benefit. The investment will amount to a \$16.6 million increase to the Child Benefit on an annual basis. Families will see that increase beginning in July, so next month they'll see that first increase.

What that increase translates to is for families with an income below \$26,000 per year, their payment per child will increase to \$1,275 per year, and that increase is up from \$925 previously. For families with a household income over \$26,000 up to \$34,000, payments for their first child will likewise increase to \$1,275 for the first child, and to \$637.50 for additional children after that. It does represent a significant increase to the Child Benefit and follows on the heels of another significant increase that was made a couple of years ago. The Child Benefit is a very effective tool to get more money into the hands of families who need money to support their children.

In addition to the Child Benefit increase, there was also an increase in the most recent budget to support programming to help those who are homeless or precariously housed as well. The homelessness program budget has increased over the last three to four years by about 400 per cent, both in response to need and to some of the housing challenges that our province is facing, but also to be responsive to what our community partners are telling us the need is - both in HRM but also in rural communities right across this province. That increase is spread right across the province.

Perhaps I'll turn it over to my colleague if there's anything else she'd like to provide.

JOY KNIGHT: I'll maybe just add a couple of other examples of work that's under way that often isn't understood or known as under the department, but is well under way - thanks to wonderful partnerships we have with our community agencies on the ground.

I would just like to add some clarification around the one-time funding that was provided for affordability measures that the deputy minister referenced. It's \$150 per person in a household, so a family of four would receive \$600. There were also investments made in the Heating Assistance Rebate Program, but in addition to that, we work very closely with the Salvation Army and their HEAT Fund program. There has been some significant investment there to extend support for utility arrears.

In addition to that as well, we work really closely with our homelessness-serving agencies, because we understand that we need to work with individuals before they're experiencing eviction or risk of eviction so that they can stay successfully housed. We've invested a lot of money recently in diversion funding to keep people safely housed who are dealing with affordability challenges as well as with food security issues. That's looking at food security in a different way - not through our traditional partners like Feed Nova Scotia, but through those agencies that are right on the ground working with our most vulnerable. In particular, those homeless and having challenges meeting their food-related needs.

I think lastly I'd just like to mention we're working very closely as well with our partners across government horizontally as the deputy minister referenced, because we know how critical that is for us to actually make an impact. In particular, I'd like to highlight working with the Department of Municipal Affairs and Housing around affordability issues related to the housing issues, particularly rent supplements, and looking and shifting toward taking a preventive approach within our department.

It's wonderful that - and we need to, I should say - we're very focused on the current emergency and the current issues that we're facing, but we also are trying to shift to a more preventive model to start to address the issues before they become a crisis and working with families more holistically, focused on the social determinants of health, with a collective response to better meet the needs of the citizens we serve.

[10:15 a.m.]

TREVOR BOUDREAU: I'm going to pass my time over to my colleague, Ms. Sheehy-Richard.

THE CHAIR: Ms. Sheehy-Richard, you have just over 10 minutes left.

MELISSA SHEEHY-RICHARD: I just want to start in and thank you guys all for being here. This is such an important conversation and topic and it affects so many different levels, as we've pointed out today, and so many different departments and associations, volunteer organizations, not-for-profits, that come together to help solve this ever-evolving rising cost for food and food inflation.

We did talk a little bit from the Deputy Minister of Agriculture about how not only is it the consumers who are buying the product but the costs associated with the farmers who are out there today planting their fields, as you mentioned as well. The Department of Agriculture recently did put an additional \$200,000 into the Limestone Trucking Assistance Program.

Deputy Minister Robichaud, I was wondering if you could discuss how this program will help lower the production cost for farmers and thus lower the cost for consumers.

LORETTA ROBICHAUD: The recognition that there are rising costs for our producers had us turn our attention to what we could possibly do in the Department of Agriculture in terms of supports. There are various ways that we came at that, but limestone was one of the obvious ones, due to the increased cost in both soil amendments and fertilizer.

We invested an additional \$200,000 on top of the \$350,000 that was currently invested, for a total of \$550,000 for limestone trucking assistance. Limestone is a critical buffering agent for producers in the province who need to adjust soil pH, and it comes at a tremendous cost with the rise in trucking. So this was an obvious area where government could assist, and it would directly lower the cost of production for producers, thus freeing up cash flow to allow them to invest in other areas - whether that be seeds or other items on the farm that are required.

Producers were at a critical decision point this Spring on whether to even plant. It's that critical with the rising cost. So the trucking assistance program is a beneficial program that will help them to put cash flow in other areas and make significant investments so that they can get through this season and hopefully see a decrease or a better Fall ahead. I think that the Federation of Agriculture may comment differently - not differently, but in addition to - but for us it was an obvious area that would have a direct impact on the producers in the province.

MELISSA SHEEHY-RICHARD: Thank you for that very important answer. It kind of leads into the next question that I just wanted to talk about. Limestone is so critical to making this soil so valuable and so productive for farmers and yielding better crops for their use.

As you know, the Avon River upstream from the existing gate structure at Highway No. 101 has been reduced to a small stream and a dry riverbed for well over a year now. This is due to a recurring federal ministerial order from DFO, I appreciate, but when it comes to food security and this valuable soil and rising food costs, can you highlight the importance of protecting the valuable 35,000 acres of prime number one soil that exists in that area?

Also, are you also able to address the concerns that perhaps the Department of Agriculture does have in relation to farmers and the impact that this order is having on that area? I was also hoping for comments from the executive director for Nova Scotia Federation of Agriculture after you finish with your remarks.

LORETTA ROBICHAUD: The Avon River aboiteau is a structure that has been operating for many decades. Currently it is under a federal ministerial order, as you referred to. The Department of Agriculture is bound by that order to follow what it contains, which has resulted in the current situation that you're experiencing in that area.

Agricultural land and preservation of agricultural land is a very important element for the Department of Agriculture. We maintain 261 kilometres of dike lands and corresponding number of aboiteaux. This happens to be one of them. It happens to be one of the bigger ones, and it happens to be part of the causeway structure. That particular project, however, is led by our colleagues at Public Works. They have been in consultation and discussions with DFO around the current situation, and not only the impact on the aboiteau but the impact on the project as a whole.

For the Department of Agriculture, recognizing Public Works takes the lead on that, we are providing a support role for our producers who may be impacted in a way that is being caused by the federal ministerial order. We recognize that if there are impacts to producers to the area, we have been meeting and having discussions with them around solutions that we might be able to offer, recognizing that we can't operate the gates differently because we are bound by the order.

We certainly recognize the significance and the importance of agricultural land. We have a whole division that's devoted to that very purpose, and we are investing \$50 million currently in maintenance of those structures to ensure that we have agricultural land into the future, and the best agricultural land into the future.

If I might add on to that, the significance even more recently of acquisition of community pasture land in Cape John would be an example of wanting to maintain

agricultural prime land for the use of producers, which then helps to reduce their cost of production and links up with the comment around food security.

CAROLYN VAN DEN HEUVEL: As an organization, we have heard a lot of concerns from farmers in the area, and we've had lots of discussions with our partners at the Department of Agriculture with regards to those challenges that we're facing. In the same position, we'd like to see no net loss of agriculture land. We know we need to preserve our prime agriculture soil, and we've also urged for a resolve so that farmers are able to plan in that area to understand what investments they can make or may need to make for solutions based on some of the challenges that we're facing, access to water being one of them.

I would say that it's really essential that we look at seeing what the long-term solution will be in that area so that we're able to support the farms to make sure they can make decisions to continue to be sustainable and ensure that we have protection of agriculture land in that area.

MELISSA SHEEHY-RICHARD: To reiterate, with the climate change and just added too to the fact that it's not just the agricultural land that we want to protect and preserve, it is also the fresh water resource that that area can provide that at this point isn't being able to be done. I hope that we can continue to advocate strongly for protection of that for our agriculture community.

I do want to talk about something else that is near and dear to my heart, and I was quite pleased again that this topic has come up in another way that our government is working towards things. I just want to talk a little bit about what we have done, Deputy Minister Robichaud, to grow our pool of skilled trades workers in the province. For example, making the first \$50,000 for income for tradespeople under 30 be tax-exempt provincially. Can you discuss the need that farmers to have for these valuable skilled tradespeople?

LORETTA ROBICHAUD: Skilled trade in agriculture is critical, because labour is a critical subject for agriculture, as it is for many trades in the province. As you know, we bring in on an annual basis nearly 2,000 temporary foreign workers who are critical in helping to ensure that we have crops go in the ground so that we have food to feed not only our population, but in terms of exports as well.

There are varieties of trades within agriculture, but a skilled trade speaks to different levels of requirement, whether it's harvesting grapes in a vineyard or working in a research lab doing critical research for nutraceuticals that might use, for example, agricultural products. It spans the gamut. If we don't have skilled labour along the continuum of the different skill sets that are required, then we have gaps in what we're able to do.

Our minister recently has convened the Nova Scotia Youth Council for Agriculture to help guide him in policy and decision-making on careers in agriculture. The youth council has had their first primary meeting. They had some excellent discussion, but we're talking about retention and attraction of skilled youth to help fill the labour need, because lost production due to a lack of workers is significant in the province, and we are very encouraged by the initial meeting with the youth council and some of their guidance and observations around how you attract youth workers into agriculture as a skill.

That meeting took place, lots of great work will come of that, and the Nova Scotia Youth Council for Agriculture will reconvene again at the Ministers' Conference for Agriculture in November and carry on that critical conversation, which will lead to actual policy and decision-making at the ministerial level.

THE CHAIR: Order. Thank you very much.

We're now going to proceed to the second round of questioning. Each caucus will have seven minutes, beginning with the Liberal caucus. Mr. Maguire.

BRENDAN MAGUIRE: Ooh, seven minutes? Okay, let's go.

The way the numbers are working now, we're seeing a large gap between wage increases and inflation. Right now, it's at 5 per cent. That's only going to get larger. We're in the middle of an energy/housing crisis, and all this is leading to what seems like an elimination of working- and middle-class folks, especially around their buying power. We've seen the government pat themselves on the back for a one-time \$150 cheque to low-income individuals, which I will again say doesn't even cover an order of groceries for a family of three or four. Really, not even a band-aid at that point.

Going back to the stats, Dr. Al-Hamdani - sorry, but you're also in my line of view. Can the middle class and working class continue to take this kind of - I want to say, are they going to be able to survive this? Are they going to be able to survive the difference between inflation and their pay?

Are they going to be able to survive? We know that low-income people are not. It's embarrassing. If you look at the amount of money that a family is getting on income assistance, especially with zero per cent increase this year, it seems to me that the numbers are trending to push the working class and middle class out of that section and possibly eliminated.

Do you see this happening if inflation continues, if the cost of everything continues to go up and wages stay stagnant?

MOHAMMED AL-HAMDANI: That's a very difficult question to answer accurately, but the way the trend has been heading - or the numbers and where they're

headed - suggests that the middle class members who are closer to the poverty line will continue to have a hard time, and they are likely to become more likely to access food services if they haven't done so before.

That is explained in the numbers of new clients that we continue to see climbing up. It's people who didn't feel the need to access food bank services in the past, and now they feel the need to do that. The closer you are to the poverty line, the more likely you are to have a harder time if you're in the middle class.

I just want to say about the yes or no question - I want just to revisit that question. In all fairness to our province, if you were to ask that question anywhere in Canada and probably, arguably, anywhere in the world - are Ontarians better off now than three months ago, or are Californians better off now versus three months ago, the answer's very likely to still be no. All that to say the issue has existed for a long time. Food insecurity rates in 2006 and 2007 were better than what we see right now, and the last several months, especially the last three months, have added some global pressures that made the issue even worse.

BRENDAN MAGUIRE: I'll throw that question to Margo, and Nick also. Are you seeing more and more, we'll say, working and middle-class individuals taking advantage of your services, and what do you foresee the outcome being if this trend continues with inflation, with wages continuing to stay stagnant?

I'm going to be frank: There is absolutely zero help from this provincial government. We've seen Newfoundland, we've seen New Brunswick, we've seen Ontario, we've seen other provinces react - Alberta. Some of it is a small per cent slash in the fuel taxes, but you know what? A 5 or 6 per cent slash or 8 per cent slash in fuel taxes at the pump once or twice a week goes a long way for everybody, and it also goes a long way for businesses and associations and not-for-profits. If this trend continues and everything continues to skyrocket, with zero help for low-income, middle- and working-class, what do you see the outcome being?

MARGO RIEBE-BUTT: As I stated earlier, we know that there are more children coming to school food programs for many reasons, but we do need increased investments in school food. The last increase by the provincial government was in 2018. It went from \$750,000 to \$1.7 million.

Now 98 per cent schools in this province offer a universal, accessible breakfast program, and the use has increased, so I would like to actually give Joy King just a moment to talk about what that means on the ground. What is she seeing? You may have a couple of kids, but she's got hundreds of kids.

THE CHAIR: Ms. King, you have just under a minute.

[10:30 a.m.]

JOY KING: I come from a school where there are 457 kids. We have 90 per cent of our kids getting and eating from our school breakfast program. We provide a lunch program, and we're paying for lunches for a large majority of our kids in our school.

I would say that over the last three months, actually, our school food budget has increased to the point that what we paid last year in total for a whole year we have spent in the last three months, just because of the increase in want, need. We know that if we fuel their little bodies, their minds are going to grow.

We're offering it all day long. It's not something that they come in and shut down at 8:30 a.m. and they don't get it anymore. We have kids coming to the office all day. We have teachers buying food for their classrooms. We have ...

THE CHAIR: Order. Ms. Chender, you have seven minutes.

CLAUDIA CHENDER: I'm happy for you to finish, and if you could let us know: How do you fund that lunch program and the rest of the food through the day?

JOY KING: We have a budget that comes through our regional centre, but also we have a lot of donations. We have programs such as Nourish Your Roots, which is dedicated to the breakfast program. It is certainly not enough, not near what we need. Like I said, we've hit so many bumps over the last couple of years. It used to be a sit-down breakfast, a hot meal, and now it's turning into many different things. I'm a pre-Primary-to-Grade 9 school. I have a program in my Grade 7 to 9s that, because of the age of the kids and the staff who are there, they provide more of a hot breakfast-type program.

We have a couple of volunteers who come in, but that has certainly decreased. Of course, packaging of what we can purchase now due to COVID restrictions has made an increase in how we purchase. Specifically, in our region, the manner in which we do purchase our food has certainly changed, and we have to purchase through a certain distributor at this point in time, which has certainly made a change. It has alleviated some of the stresses that have come from how to receive our food, how to get it. Before it was school staff who would go to purchase on their weekends or whatnot. Now it is delivered to the school. However, that has created a huge increase in cost and the availability.

It does match our nutritional policies really well, so we're able to feed our students with a lot of different options. Schools are responsible for that individually, so I have someone in the community who comes in and does the lunch program. We charge \$4.75 for a lunch. That includes a drink and a meal. Like I said, every month we're paying over \$500 in school lunches to that individual, just to fund the students who do not have lunch. Like I said, it's all day long. There's food going all day long, so we know those kids are hungry.

CLAUDIA CHENDER: I'm sure there's a lot more to say. But I guess one of the takeaways is, like many schools in my constituency and across the province, that happens on the backs and good hearts of teachers and parents and community volunteers, and just the ingenuity of being able to scrape together those donations and that money. I think we wish that was not the case, but it's wonderful to see that you're doing that.

You mentioned a single distributor, but I wanted to maybe just turn it back to Mr. Jennery. For Feed Nova Scotia, you mentioned that you now purchase a great deal of food. Are you able to purchase some of that food locally? Does Feed Nova Scotia have a relationship with local food producers and farmers? How does that work?

NICK JENNER: Absolutely. About 50 per cent of everything we distribute. We've just broken through three million kilograms of food per year in distribution - never before done in our 38-year history. About 50 per cent of that is fresh fruits and vegetables and perishable frozen product. We have 24 farmers who consistently, month in and month out, pandemic or no pandemic, are donating food, which we are hugely grateful for. It is supplemented periodically by some federal government programs. For example, under the Surplus Food Rescue Program, we received 356,000 pounds of potatoes during the P.E.I. situation that was recently experienced.

Local is always best. If you come to our shop - and I would welcome you at any time - we'll take you into the cooler and you can see exactly what they are and you can see there's very little difference between those foods and what you'd see in the supermarket. They are fresh. They're great quality.

CLAUDIA CHENDER: I was glad to be at the opening of your new location - newish now, I would say. I'm just going to turn the last few minutes over to my colleague Susan Leblanc.

THE CHAIR: Ms. Leblanc.

SUSAN LEBLANC: Thank you. I was listening to an economist speak the other day on food security. She was talking about how once upon a time, mushroom farmers - not farmers, but mushroom pickers, the labourers on the farm - were making \$60,000 a year picking mushrooms. Then Loblaws came in and said, we want mushrooms for much cheaper because we want to sell them for \$2.99 - which is great for the consumer, obviously. So the mushroom industry went to temporary foreign workers, who were paid much less than folks who were living in Canada year-round.

I'm wondering if anyone can talk about this relationship between the pressure from companies on farmers to keep their prices low and how that then translates to the availability or the sustainability of smaller local farms, and also the ability for farmers to pay living wages. We don't need to necessarily talk about the temporary foreign worker thing; that's a whole other subject that I'd love to talk about.

I'm just wondering if anyone can sort of speak to that relationship and what we can do to make sure that prices can stay reasonable for the consumer but at the same time make sure that the people in the agriculture industry are making a good living wage and that we're supporting our local farmers. Anyone?

THE CHAIR: Ms. Van Den Heuvel? You have 30 seconds.

CAROLYN VAN DEN HEUVEL: Okay. I think that's a really good point, ensuring that we're able to pay living wages. A recent survey we did among our members showed that we're actually seeing farmers decreasing what their wages are so that they're able to increase the wages of their workers. We still have some work to do in that space. The reality is that we often hear that farmers are price-takers on both ends, where we don't get to set what we're purchasing for inputs and we also don't necessarily set our price for what we're selling our commodity for to the market.

THE CHAIR: Order. I'm sorry. Over to the PC caucus. Mr. MacDonald.

JOHN A. MACDONALD: My colleague was correct, so if you want to finish yours - it does lead into a question I have, so if you could finish, that would be fine, and then I'll ask my question.

CAROLYN VAN DEN HEUVEL: Thank you. Now I lost the train of thought that I had there. (Laughter)

We are price-takers on both sides. We're not even sure, when we're planting right now, what we're going to get for our product, necessarily. There are a number of business models, whether direct to market or not. It's a complex question to answer.

We are hopeful right now, federally. There is a review of a grocer code of conduct which we're not directly involved with ourselves. We have representation from Nova Scotia there, and the Canadian Federation of Agriculture is participating in that. We are really hopeful as an industry that that is intended to support a better system that will benefit our entire food system so that our consumers and our farmers - to ensure that our farmers are receiving a fair price. We're hopeful that the review of that grocery code of conduct opportunity and the implementation of that might be something that helps support us.

JOHN A. MACDONALD: This will be to the deputy minister. We're all aware farming is important for healthy, local food for Nova Scotians, and farmers are facing huge challenges. What does the department do to help farmers on a practical level?

LORETTA ROBICHAUD: The Department of Agriculture works hand in hand with producers every day. We have six regional offices that are dispersed from Yarmouth to Sydney, where we have extension staff that do outreach with those individuals, helping them with everything like navigating, what regulations mean, how to apply for programs,

connecting them to supports that they might need, business planning, and production advice. It's really facilitating and helping work with those farmers every day.

Our business advisory services that we have in the department is a program where we provide producers with the opportunity to have business plans done, and we covered that cost. That really helps them to map out a direction that they want to take in the future by having a sound business plan which would go into various levels of detail - including cost of production, and where they need to pay particular attention to help them in what is a very competitive industry.

At the location in Truro, for example, we have provincial labs, and we offer services at rates to producers that encourage them and support them in getting analysis for their soils, their feed, their water, so that they can, again, make informed decisions. We talked about the limestone trucking, for example. They would have that soil analyzed in our provincial lab so that they know exactly what the soil amendment is that's required for their field. There are various other initiatives: as recently as today, mentioning the loan deferral program for producers to help them shift their cash flow into areas where it's needed most, and then we offer shared funding programs with our federal counterparts.

The current policy framework is the Canadian Agriculture Partnership. We work under CAP. It expires next year in March of 2023, but producers rely on those programs to help them advance in terms of tech transfer, innovation, environmental sustainability. There's a whole host of programs to help support producers, and we are in negotiations currently for the next policy framework and those programs that will be available to producers. We're in consultation not only with the producers directly, but through a facilitated role with the Federation of Agriculture helping us to identify what are the critical needs of producers in this next framework.

JOHN A. MACDONALD: Regarding the rising costs that are happening worldwide, what do you see for any room for optimism for our farmers today?

LORETTA ROBICHAUD: These are difficult times for producers, and we certainly recognize that in the Province, but we always remain optimistic. In Agriculture, we have some of the most innovative, dedicated, and committed individuals working for the benefit of feeding all Nova Scotians, and we are here to support them in helping to accomplish that. We always remain optimistic, even when the markets are challenging or even when we're under pressures like we're currently under, and our producers are feeling that every day.

They're very innovative. I could speak at length about numerous innovations that producers have implemented to decrease their cost of production. Time would not afford that today, but I'd be more than happy to provide that information or speak to it in greater detail. They're doing very innovative things.

When we ran the Clean Technology for Agriculture Program, the \$5 million program, it was fully subscribed. It was a two-year program, and they had innovative projects in and the money dispersed and the projects started in the first year. It speaks to their commitment and dedication to finding new ways of lowering their production and being innovative and sustainable so that they can continue to do the work they do with the passion that they have to feed the people of Nova Scotia. It's a very committed occupation.

There are great examples, as I alluded to, both in entrepreneurship and their creativity and they're continuing to grow. I'd be remiss if I didn't speak to the working relationship that we have with their member organization, the Nova Scotia Federation of Agriculture, that we meet with on a regular basis and have very informed conversations about their needs and how we might help, because it is about supporting the producers.

We need to hear from the producers what they need so that we can help them on that journey, and I think through that we will help address the issues that we're speaking about today: self-sufficiency, access, production, awareness - all of the elements that make food available and affordable and accessible to the citizens of Nova Scotia.

THE CHAIR: Order. The time for questioning has elapsed. Thank you, everyone, for coming out today. Would anyone like to make a closing statement? We'll go to Mr. Jennery.

NICK JENNERY: I never want to ignore an opportunity to say a few things. I guess I would quickly say that I'm grateful, I'm worried, and I'm optimistic. I'm grateful for the volunteers who happen, I'm grateful for people who donate, I'm grateful for the committee that's shown interest in this topic, because you show real genuine care.

I'm worried about the stress on the system. In my own shop, the stress on staff and the declining number of volunteers, aging of volunteers who support food bank operations, and that proverbial wave of need keeps coming at us, so I'm really worried about that.

I'm optimistic because coming out of the pandemic, all of the 140 agencies - and I would include ourselves in that - have shown a resilience and an innovation. We are committed to finding better ways to provide, and this is the definition, access to the foods that people need when they need it. That access, that's choice, that's availability.

That's the short-term task that we're taking on that we can do, but I'm also optimistic that government and those in a position of influence will make this a higher priority so that we don't have to live with the downstream, unsustainable impact of ignoring this.

THE CHAIR: Ms. Riebe-Butt, in probably your final appearance here in this particular room.

[10:45 a.m.]

MARGO RIEBE-BUTT: I'd personally like to say I've appeared before many of you personally, and I'd like to thank each and every one of you for your interest.

My closing remarks are really my opening remarks, which was a very specific ask to this government, to drop down the barriers, have cross-government collaboration, and get the federal government to own up to their commitment to create a Canada-wide, universal, national school food program.

Now is a little bit of the sales pitch around that. I want you to see it as the opportunity it is, and thinking about what many of my colleagues here talked about today. First of all, there's geographic equity in this program. Schools are located where your constituents live. They're rural, they're urban, they're everywhere. Think about it as an economic opportunity. I'm thinking about what Dr. Charlebois said: food autonomy strategy and local procurement, and all those benchmarks that I know are in current mandate letters as well.

Think about the infrastructure renewal, the opportunity for retrofits, good paying wage jobs for construction workers and equipment operators and all sorts of others, and then think about the food service workers. Those jobs would be in every community. They need to be properly waged, they need to be respected, they need to have all the training that the rest of the school staff does, because they feed our kids in school.

There's a return on investment for school food programs. For every dollar spent, there's a \$3 to \$10 return on investment. I wish I had investments that would make that kind of money. This is an investment in our future here in Nova Scotia, and we all need to make it, and those are my closing remarks.

THE CHAIR: Dr. Charlebois, I didn't see you when I was polling folks to see if they wanted to make closing remarks. Did you want to say anything further?

SYLVAIN CHARLEBOIS: If I may, very quickly. First of all, thank you very much for inviting me, and thank you to the Legislature for having this very important conversation. I must say, it's a positive step, I think, but more work is needed.

We have mentioned that the food inflation rate right now in the province is at 9.8 per cent. It is going to get worse. What we're facing right now this year is particularly harsh with the conflict in Ukraine and many countries hoarding food right now. I don't know if anyone is aware of what's going on around the world, but things are going to get worse, I'm afraid.

We need to be ready as a province and make our food economy less vulnerable as much as possible.

THE CHAIR: Thank you, Dr. Charlebois. Ms. Van Den Heuvel, final remarks?

CAROLYN VAN DEN HEUVEL: I would reiterate some of the comments that others made, and I think - I hope this isn't the last time that we're all together in the same room having this conversation because I think key to this success is the collaboration that we see here. I think the folks who are sitting here and participating today are those who can help identify some of the solutions.

There are opportunities in agriculture, and sometimes we're talking about the stresses, and we're talking about the stress in our community right now with regard to food security. I want to ensure that we see opportunities, but we also need to recognize that our farmers are overburdened right now. Results from the 2021 survey on farmer mental health in Canada cited some pretty concerning data. Suicide ideation is two times higher in farmers than the general population, and 76 per cent of our farmers were classified as experiencing moderate or high perceived levels of stress. That's concerning.

We know that Nova Scotian farmers aren't immune to those statistics, and with Farm Safety Nova Scotia in 2021, we did take action to develop a blueprint for a mental health action plan for Nova Scotia farmers, but at the crux of it, our farms need to be sustainable, and to be sustainable, they need to be profitable.

As the deputy minister mentioned, farmers are very passionate about what they do. Pursuing a life of farming is hard physically, mentally, and emotionally, but it's a passion and a love that runs deep in our industry. Nova Scotia farmers want nothing more than to produce safe, affordable, and accessible food to Nova Scotians, but we have to ensure it doesn't come at the expense of their physical and mental health, or at the expense of them providing for their own families.

I think if our goal as a province is to double our population by 2060, we must put in place some measures to allow for the food security, to allow for food production, for a food system that supports that food here in Nova Scotia, and we believe the only way we can do this is through effective collaboration and consultation. So we're ready and willing to help, and hope we get to come together again to find those solutions.

THE CHAIR: Thank you very much. Thank you all for coming this afternoon. We're now going to move on to committee businesses. We have a short window here. You can leave if you want. Ordinarily, I would call a recess, but we don't have enough time for that, so feel free to stay if you'd like or not.

BRENDAN MAGUIRE: I have a motion I'd like to put on the floor. We only have a few minutes.

THE CHAIR: Yes, Mr. Maguire.

BRENDAN MAGUIRE: We recently found out that Nova Scotia Power is trying to fight to not release publicly their executive bonuses in pay to the UARB in their applications. We know this is Nova Scotia's money, and Nova Scotians deserve to know. So, I ask that we bring Nova Scotia Power in the next available session before this - before we wrap up the Summer - to make that information public because Nova Scotians deserve to know.

THE CHAIR: Thank you. Any discussion on this motion? Mr. Young.

NOLAN YOUNG: I'd just like to suggest, because we've talked in the past, that during the next agenda-setting, if the topic's important for our colleague here, to bring it forth the next agenda-setting.

THE CHAIR: Any further discussion?

BRENDAN MAGUIRE: Recorded vote.

THE CHAIR: This will be a recorded vote, so I will ask that the clerk to call the names.

The clerk will conduct a recorded vote.

[The clerk calls the roll.]

[10:54 a.m.]

YEAS

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

NAYS

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

THE CLERK: For, 4. Against, 5.

THE CHAIR: The motion is defeated.

Mr. Maguire.

HON. BRENDAN MAGUIRE: I have one more motion. We heard today from the experts that there is a cost of living crisis. No more evidence is needed for this government and this Premier.

I ask that we call upon the Department of Finance and Treasury Board and staff from the Premier's Office to appear next week before the Public Accounts Committee to discuss their promise for a better paycheque and what they're doing with their newfound gas tax windfall that's helping low-income, middle-class, and working-class Nova Scotians.

THE CHAIR: Any discussion on the motion? Ms. Chender.

CLAUDIA CHENDER: The next scheduled topic is a discussion of the impact of a low-wage economy on government revenue and expenses. I think we'll get to that conversation about wages and paycheques and all of that. We'll have the Department of Labour, Skills and Immigration here, and we'll have the Minimum Wage Review Committee here, the CCPA, and others whom I think can speak to this issue. I'm comfortable sticking with our next topic and not pre-empting it for a different one.

THE CHAIR: Any further discussion?

BRENDAN MAGUIRE: Recorded vote.

THE CHAIR: I'll ask the clerk to read the names.

[The clerk calls the roll.]

[10:56 a.m.]

YEAS

Hon. Brendan Maguire
Hon. Kelly Regan

NAYS

Trevor Boudreau
Melissa Sheehy-Richard
John A. MacDonald
Dave Ritcey
Nolan Young
Susan Leblanc
Claudia Chender

THE CLERK: For, 2. Against, 7.

THE CHAIR: The motion is defeated.

Mr. Maguire.

BRENDAN MAGUIRE: Lastly, I will say that yesterday I had the privilege to attend the Health Committee. One of the reasonings by the Progressive Conservative government to not bring these topics forward is that it has to be chosen during the agenda-setting meetings. The Health Committee runs exactly like Public Accounts Committee

now, and yet in November, a stakeholder reached out to the committee asking that they appear, and that decision was made outside of the committee's agenda-setting. They voted to have witnesses appear because it was important to Nova Scotians.

The reasoning used in Public Accounts to not have these witnesses appear in a time when people want answers is completely false. Some of the same members on the government side have shown that they're willing to vote in one committee one way and in Public Accounts Committee the other.

THE CHAIR: In terms of other business, we have correspondence. Nova Scotia Power has sent us back information requested from the May 4th meeting, and the Department of Labour, Skills and Immigration has sent information requested from the April 13th meeting.

Does anyone have any questions or anything about that correspondence or anything they want to say? Ms. Chender.

CLAUDIA CHENDER: Have we gotten this by email? It's just a bit difficult to read the Nova Scotia Power one. (Interruption) You've already sent that by email. Okay, thank you.

THE CHAIR: Now that the committee business has been concluded, I will just let members know that our next meeting is on June 8, 2022, when our witnesses will be the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives; the Department of Community Services; the Department of Labour, Skills and Immigration; and the Minimum Wage Review Committee. The topic will be the impact of a low-wage economy on government revenue and expenses.

If there are no further motions or any further business, I will now adjourn the meeting. The meeting is adjourned.

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