

HANSARD

NOVA SCOTIA HOUSE OF ASSEMBLY

COMMITTEE

ON

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS

Wednesday, April 24, 2024

RED CHAMBER

Review of Social Support Programs

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Public Accounts Committee

Lorelei Nicoll (Chair)
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[Danielle Barkhouse was replaced by Hon. Trevor Boudreau.]
[Lisa Lachance was replaced by Suzy Hansen.]

In Attendance:

Kim Langille
Committee Clerk

James de Salis
Administrative Support Clerk

Philip Grassie
Legislative Counsel

WITNESSES

Department of Community Services

Cathy MacIsaac - Associate Deputy Minister

Suzanne Ley - Executive Director, Employment Support & Income Assistance

Maria Medioli - Executive Director, Disability Support Program

Tracy Embrett - Executive Director, Child and Family Wellbeing

Department of Municipal Affairs and Housing

Byron Rafuse - Deputy Minister

Kathy Cox-Brown - Project Executive, Housing



HALIFAX, WEDNESDAY, APRIL 24, 2024

STANDING COMMITTEE ON PUBLIC ACCOUNTS

9:00 A.M.

CHAIR
Lorelei Nicoll

VICE CHAIR
Danielle Barkhouse

THE CHAIR: Order. The meeting is for the Standing Committee on Public Accounts. I'm Lorelei Nicoll, the Chair of the committee. I'll remind everyone to have your phones on silent. I will ask the committee members to introduce themselves, beginning with the member to my left.

[The committee members introduced themselves.]

THE CHAIR: As is customary, there are members from the Auditor General's Office here with us, and I will ask my Legislative Counsel to introduce himself.

PHILIP GRASSIE: Good morning, Philip Grassie, Legislative Counsel.

THE CHAIR: To my right, the Legislative Committee Clerk.

KIM LANGILLE: Good morning, I'm Kim Langille, Committee Clerk.

THE CHAIR: On today's agenda, we have officials with us from the Department of Community Services and the Department of Municipal Affairs and Housing with respect to the Review of Social Support Programs. I'll ask the witnesses to introduce themselves, beginning with the member to my far left.

[The witnesses introduced themselves.]

THE CHAIR: Welcome, everyone. I understand there are opening remarks, beginning with Associate Deputy Minister MacIsaac.

CATHY MACISAAC: Chair, committee members, thank you for inviting me today to talk about social support programs offered by the Department of Community Services. Accompanying me are Suzanne Ley, executive director of Employment Support and Income Assistance; Maria Medioli, executive director of the Disability Support Program; and Tracy Embrett, executive director of Child and Family Wellbeing.

At the Department of Community Services, one of our main goals is to help our clients develop increased resiliency and self-sufficiency. We recognize that the inflationary pressures we're seeing across the country and around the world have been making life harder for many Nova Scotians. Over the past few years, there have been increased investments in all aspects of our department, and we are growing and enhancing the programs and supports we offer. For example, we are transforming the Disability Support Program so everyone has choice and equal opportunity to participate and find success in their community. We have made significant investments to increase the number and range of options to address homelessness. We are redesigning the foster care system and investing in prevention and early intervention programs, key to helping families at risk.

In addition, the government has taken strong action to help those living on low incomes. Most recently we've announced annual indexing of income assistance. A new funding stream to support income assistance clients with a disability or a serious medical condition, which will benefit more than 60 per cent of recipients of the Employment Support and Income Assistance program. We are providing a one-time \$150 payment for each income assistance client who does not qualify for the new disability supplement announced in November.

At the same time, our Employment Support and Income Assistance program offers a variety of opportunities to help our clients build the skills and experience needed for work. We also know investments in our young people are essential to breaking the cycle of poverty and building a stronger Nova Scotia. We provide a continuum of supports to help youth build connections to community, transition into post-secondary education, and attach to the workforce.

We are also improving supports for young people leaving the care of the minister. DCS has created the Path Program that supports young people as they take their first steps to independence and building their futures, including ongoing financial supports and connections to supportive people and programs.

It's important to note that all this work involves multiple government departments and service providers. We are grateful to the staff and service provider partners in

communities across the province for their dedication to serving and supporting their fellow Nova Scotians. We recognize there is more to be done, and we will continue to work diligently with all our partners to identify and implement further measures to help Nova Scotians.

THE CHAIR: Now we will go to Deputy Minister Rafuse for opening remarks.

BYRON RAFUSE: Good morning, Chair, and members of the committee. I understand the committee is interested in learning about what we're doing to help Nova Scotians address the issues of affordability and the rising cost of living. Together, we will do our best to address your questions.

As you know, there is immense pressure on housing across the country, and unfortunately we are no different here in Nova Scotia. We know that the main cure for the housing crisis is more homes, and we know affordability improves when supply improves.

The Premier has been clear in his instructions to the department: We need to do more to get more housing built faster. That work is happening. We created a strong, clear housing plan with solid data, backed with historic investments that will help create the conditions for an additional 41,200 units over the next five years.

While new housing supply is being constructed, we continue to enhance other programming supports to help people with affordability. We also look forward to learning more about the additional opportunities and programming supports that may be forthcoming to Nova Scotians through the recent federal budget.

In the meantime, rent supplements are one way the government is helping to cushion the impact of rising costs for Nova Scotians in core need of housing. Year over year, we've continued to significantly expand this program while the federal contributions have not kept pace. The annual investment in the rent supplement program between the years 2020-21 and 2024-25 has grown 523 per cent, from \$11.1 million to \$69.2 million. At the same time, the number of households we've assisted has grown 274 per cent, from 3,100 to 8,500.

I would like to point out that all new rent supplements are portable. That means the supplement is attached to the person, not the landlord. This means that recipients can keep the benefit when they move. This empowers recipients, giving them more choice and control over where they live.

We are also investing in the preservation and growth of affordable housing in the community housing sector through programs like the Community Housing Infrastructure and Repair Program, the Community Housing Growth Fund, and the Community Housing Acquisition Program, which help non-profit housing organizations to acquire existing rental housing and preserve it at affordable rental rates.

Nova Scotia is also building 222 new public housing units - the first major investment in 30 years - so that up to 522 more people will have a safe place to call home. A further 25 modular homes have been deployed to quickly provide two- and three-bedroom units for up to 88 low-income Nova Scotians. In total, these investments will provide 247 homes to over 600 people.

Our home repair and adaptation programs are also a significant help to seniors and low-income households by providing financial assistance to make urgent emergency repairs, health- and safety-related repairs, as well as disability-related modifications. This year, the budget for this program stands at \$23.8 million. Around 2,250 more homeowners will be assisted through home-repair and adaptation programs this year than in previous years.

I will conclude by saying that I know everybody in this room shares a vision for a strong future where all Nova Scotians have safe, affordable housing that meets their diverse needs. Thank you, and now I'll be happy to take your questions.

THE CHAIR: We will open the floor now to questions, starting with the first round for 20 minutes with the Liberal caucus. MLA Clark.

BRAEDON CLARK: Good morning, everybody. Thank you all for being here. I wanted to start with a few questions that I believe are probably best suited for Associate Deputy Minister MacIsaac - if there's somebody you want to direct it to, please do that as well - around the issue with Pallet shelters, which I think we all agree is a very important project. I know that just last month, there would have been a site opened in Sackville. I'm just curious - there have been some delays in terms of initial timelines. We were told originally that they would be up this Winter that's just passed. Obviously, we didn't meet all of those goals.

I'm just wondering: Is the department confident that when next Winter rolls around in a few months' time, will all the Pallet shelter sites be open and accessible and ready for people who need them at that time?

THE CHAIR: Associate Deputy Minister MacIsaac.

CATHY MACISAAC: I will ask Ms. Ley to provide a bit more detail. I will say that we are quite confident. There is a lot of activity happening now on this file. I'll note the Pallet shelters are one aspect of the wide continuum of supports for addressing homelessness, but specific to Pallet shelters, I'll ask Ms. Ley, if that's okay.

SUZANNE LEY: As ADM MacIsaac mentioned, Pallet shelter villages are really one piece of the work that we're doing in the housing continuum and the supports that we're trying to provide for folks who are experiencing homelessness.

As you mentioned, we have one village open now in Lower Sackville and Beacon House Interfaith Society is our service provider on-site. They are doing incredible work supporting the folks who are in the Pallet shelter village. We've heard some really great stories of individuals, for instance, who were sleeping rough then moved to the Halifax Forum for emergency shelter, and then were approved to move into a Pallet shelter at Beacon House.

Certainly, that individual is now on a path to greater stability and greater independence. At Beacon House, they're able to access things like employment supports and wraparound supports. They've got a mental health clinician who comes in five times a week. They've got lots of workshops happening with reachability. Again, we're really excited about the work that's happening there and the part that Pallet villages will play in the housing continuum.

As ADM MacIsaac mentioned, lots of work is happening at pace to get the other units in the ground. For instance, we've got a village that will open in a number of weeks in Kentville. Open Arms Resource Centre Society is our service provider there. Work is happening very quickly there. We're also working with partners, as you would know, in CBRM - New Dawn Enterprises and the Ally Centre of Cape Breton to support individuals who are sleeping rough and experiencing homelessness in CBRM. We're having regular and active conversations with HRM and others to plan where the other units will go.

We're very confident. I would say that there has been an incredible amount of partnership on this project. Folks like Nova Scotia Power, Halifax Water, and our service providers are really all coming to the table and bringing everything that they can to make things move as quickly as possible by prioritizing the work. We're very confident, hopeful, and excited about the role that the Pallet villages can play in our work.

BRAEDON CLARK: How many Pallet shelters are open today and how many is the department expecting will be open by the end of this calendar year?

SUZANNE LEY: There are 19 open currently. As I mentioned, we have 20 coming in Kentville in the next couple of weeks. We're just finalizing the plans for another 30 to 35 in CBRM. We've got conversations happening in other places. We fully expect the entire 200 that we've purchased to be built by the end of this calendar year.

BRAEDON CLARK: Perhaps this might be premature, I'm not sure. Are there plans to purchase additional shelters? How will the department determine if 200 are enough or if more are needed? How does that decision making process play out?

SUZANNE LEY: As I mentioned, Pallet villages are just one part of the work that we're doing in support of housing, emergency sheltering, and providing supports to those experiencing homelessness.

As you would know, we have emergency shelters and Winter shelters that are open across the province. Pallet villages play one part of that role. We have tiny homes coming online in Lower Sackville later this year as well as a large number of supportive housing units. We know that currently there are 693 units in Nova Scotia and 524 of those have been built since the Fall of 2021.

[9:15 a.m.]

We plan to do much more of that this year. In terms of the question of how we determine what's next, we're continually working with our service providers and with our partners at the municipality and other parts of government to understand what the need is, where folks are, what their needs and experiences are, and how we, together with lots of other folks, meet those needs depending on where they are on the housing continuum.

BRAEDON CLARK: I also wanted to ask about income assistance and indexing. Obviously, we're happy to see that income assistance has been indexed. I think there has been agreement across the board that this is something we need do. Congratulations to the department for doing that. I think it's a good thing - the one-time \$150 payment and a substantial increase to disability clients. That's all very positive news. I don't want to downplay that.

Nevertheless, income assistance rates are still difficult and, in most cases, almost impossible for people to live on, given the cost of living pressures right now. Inflation might be 3 per cent or so right now in Canada - forgive me if I don't have it exactly right - I believe a single person on income assistance might be receiving somewhere in the range of \$600 per month, so 3 per cent of that might be \$18. I don't mean to minimize it, but I want to give a sense of the scale here.

Was there consideration of increasing the monthly income assistance rate, which has been frozen for the last three years, in this budget? If that decision wasn't made, are there plans to bring that forward in future years, to make sure the most vulnerable will continue to get the support they need?

CATHY MACISAAC: It was agreed - wonderful to see the indexing be approved and come onboard. We're looking forward to the implementation of that in July. It will be retroactive to April 1st, so those payments will come along, as well as the \$300 you referenced for individuals with a disability or a serious medical condition, then the \$150 one-time payment - similar payments have been made in the past.

We are aware, as I mentioned in my opening remarks, that there's always more to do, and we're always looking for initiatives. Regarding income assistance, there are the standard household rate and base rates. Our caseworkers do work closely with individuals for other supports, such as for special diets, transportation, or other needs that would supplement the basic income assistance rates.

There are also other programs across the department. Later on maybe we'll talk about the Path Program, which is helping young people leaving the care of the minister with financial supports. We're always looking at a range of options that would be helpful to low-income and vulnerable Nova Scotians. We'll continue that work.

BRAEDON CLARK: Regarding indexing, the one-time payment, and the increases to disability clients, are those changes sufficient for income assistance in your view? Are we still - I don't want to say not meeting the goals we should - but are those changes sufficient in the department's view?

CATHY MACISAAC: I would acknowledge that there's been unprecedented investment in supports for low-income Nova Scotians in all the programs I just referenced. We'll continue that work, and we'll continue to look at other supports we can provide. Again, I want to acknowledge the hard-working staff across the province who are working one-on-one with clients to try to meet their individual needs. There's broad programming and then trying to support individuals, as well, specifically with their needs.

BRAEDON CLARK: I'd like to move over to some questions to Deputy Rafuse and the team from the Department of Municipal Affairs and Housing now if I could. Ms. Cox-Brown, I'm happy you're here because rent supplements are a big issue and an important topic that I am interested in.

As we all know, the thresholds for eligibility for rent supplements were changed from 30 per cent to 50 per cent. I know it's a federal-provincial funded program, and it's not all provincial dollars, but does the department have discretion to change that threshold back to 30 per cent? Does the department have the authority or the ability to do that, independent of budget constraints? Does the department have the basic ability to do that if it chose to?

BYRON RAFUSE: I'm going to give a high-level answer and hand it off to Ms. Cox-Brown, who can give you specifics to your questions. You should recognize the tremendous investment the Province has made in rent supplements over the last few years - as I noted in my opening remarks, a tremendous increase in total funding and a tremendous increase in the amount of people it touches. We are now well exceeding our obligation under the federal program to cost-match this program. We are now in I think a five-to-one ratio or something like that. For the specifics of any questions, I'll hand it off to Ms. Cox-Brown, but we will continue as we always do to look at all our programs to find ways to refine those and make policy changes that we believe better address the needs of the recipient.

THE CHAIR: Ms. Cox-Brown.

KATHY COX-BROWN: It is a federal program that we have, even though - as the deputy minister has said - we pay a significant amount of money towards it. It's based on

federal requirements, this program. The reason for the switch from the 30 per cent to the 50 per cent was to meet people in their deepest need for the program. It is a targeted housing program, so it was to target people in their biggest need. To do that, we've also had to increase - I mean, last year we increased the program by \$22 million, and we had an extra 1,000 rent supplements. This year we're increasing it by \$17.2 million for another additional 500 rent supplements. Any change to the program would require federal approval.

BRAEDON CLARK: Just to make sure I understand correctly, if the minister or Cabinet or whomever decided, We want to move the threshold back to the 30 per cent - which is where it was a year and a half to two years ago - the Province could not make that change independently? The federal government would have to approve that? Do I understand that correctly?

KATHY COX-BROWN: We submit all policy changes to the federal government for their approval, yes.

BRAEDON CLARK: When the threshold was changed from 30 per cent to 50 per cent, was that a decision initiated by the Province, or did the federal government come to the Province and say, We want to make this change? How did that actually come about?

KATHY COX-BROWN: It was before my time, but I'll tell you, yes, it would have been initiated probably from the Province, but would require federal approval before it could ever be implemented.

BRAEDON CLARK: I appreciate that clarification. Another issue related to rent supplements - which as I said, I agree is a good program, and I know the Province has invested a lot more money in it over the last few years, so I recognize that - I've raised in Question Period, I've talked to the minister about it, and I think he's aware that other members have done the same as well, is the issue around average market rent in terms of calculations. I think it can lead to some distorted outcomes where the average market rent number doesn't correspond super well with reality on the ground.

There was a constituent of mine, a woman, who had - I believe the average market rent number she was told was \$1,400 or something like that for two bedrooms. You're looking at \$2,200 or \$2,300 easily in the area. I know the minister - and we've talked about this, it's a CMHC data set that that's drawn from, but is there any ability to refine that? Can the Province get its own data? Can we break that data down into smaller sets so that it's more tailored to a neighbourhood or a community? Right now, I think the numbers that get spit out do not reflect reality, and therefore I think some people are being denied because of numbers that I think are a bit out of date and not relevant for their actual circumstances. I just wanted to get the department's view on that issue.

THE CHAIR: Deputy Minister Rafuse.

BYRON RAFUSE: First, I'll comment about the use of average market rates. As I said earlier, the Province will continue to look at all of our programs to see where we can make refinements to better meet the needs of the recipients of those programs. The use of average market rent has been raised by yourself and others that maybe want - it needs to be looked at, and we are looking at that.

The resolution to that in some instances might surprise you as to what it means to the individual, but as we work through that policy we'll endeavour to improve it. I'm going to ask Ms. Cox-Brown to talk about the details around how that rate is used, but we're not contemplating getting into the business of developing our own database of our market rates we use.

CMHC is a good source of reliable information. They have the ability to gather this information. It is updated on a periodic basis. They have access, through their surveying, to data that we would not have. It is accurate, although it may seem counterproductive sometimes, but it takes into account the results of the surveys that individuals have submitted. So it is reflective of the average market rate in that area.

You can argue some of the geographic areas could be broken down further, but with a province the size of Nova Scotia, it's tough to do that and have it be statistically accurate using a smaller sample size, because this is a sample. So no, we're not going to be looking at any other source other than CMHC. A lot of our programs are tied into it, but the use of the area market rate can be reviewed and will be reviewed. I'm just going to ask Ms. Cox-Brown to talk a little bit more about how it is used in the rent supplement program.

KATHY COX-BROWN: Again, the AMR is a federal requirement, as the deputy has spoken. The AMR is based on new and existing rentals, as well as vacant ones and ones that are full, and it is a very scientific-proven kind of survey. We use it in the calculation of eligibility because it's 50 per cent of AMR in our eligibility calculation, and we use it in the calculation that it's 50 per cent. We do the AMR, and then we minus 30 per cent of your gross income, and that would be your contribution, and then we pay the rest to the client.

It has increased. We do increase it annually, based on the latest survey. It has been significantly increasing by 12 per cent, and we're estimating 10 per cent this year. What we have seen, the result is that subsidies are increasing because of the increase in AMR. In 2021, the average subsidy was around \$300 - it's doubled now. In some of our programs, the average subsidy is in the \$700 range.

BRAEDON CLARKE: Just a quick clarification: I think Ms. Cox-Brown might have mentioned it, but how often is that CMHC survey updated? Is it annual?

KATHY COX-BROWN: Annually.

BRAEDON CLARK: I think I only have a few seconds left. I appreciate the data set. If at all possible, if it can carve out - and I take your point, Deputy Rafuse, on sample size and applicability - I think if we can be as surgical as possible on that, I think that would be helpful. I think there are some discrepancies that exist, despite good intentions, obviously, of the design of the program and the data set. With that, I'll turn it over to my NDP colleagues.

THE CHAIR: We'll go to the next 20 minutes of questioning with the NDP caucus. MLA Leblanc.

SUSAN LEBLANC: Thanks to everyone for being here. I wanted just to start by saying thank you to the people at the table who I have lots of contact with or have had lots of contact with in the past. I truly appreciate your ability to take calls about constituency issues. I just want to start there; it's really helpful.

The latest person I've been in contact with is Ms. Ley, and I just wanted to ask two questions about the Pallet program. Number 1, and this is because I truly don't know this answer, but where does the buck stop on the approval of where the Pallet shelters go? Is it DCS, or is it the Department of Housing and Municipal Affairs?

THE CHAIR: Ms. Ley.

SUZANNE LEY: Do you mean which department is approving where the locations are? It is primarily a DCS responsibility, but we work very closely with our colleagues at the Department of Public Works. We are not engineers, and they are. They have expertise and help us determine, for instance, the site size. We get advice from them in terms of access to services like sewer, water, electricity - working with Nova Scotia Power and other partners like that.

We come at it from the perspective of how close is it to services? How accessible is it to transportation? Do we have a service provider in a local community that is willing to work with us? What population - what model would work in the location? Really, lots of things go into determining locations for where a Pallet village - really, where all of our work happens. At the end of the day, it is under the Department of Community Services portfolio, but we do it in partnership with lots of others.

SUSAN LEBLANC: That's very helpful. I was going to ask you what you look for in a site, so you've said most of it. I just want to clarify the services part. When you say access to services - besides sewer, water, and power, what kind of services should be nearby or accessible to folks living in Pallet villages?

SUZANNE LEY: I missed a partner in my first answer of who works with us and who helps us determine locations. Municipalities also play an important role. I mentioned

in an earlier answer that we have lots of conversations actively happening right now with HRM in terms of where the other locations will be in HRM for Pallet villages.

[9:30 a.m.]

Your question around what other types of services - we look for things like access to transit. Can folks who are living in the village get to a bus or to other points of transit to be able to access other service providers like health care, things like that? We'll look to things like food. Is there accessible food for village residents? Of course, we'll bring resources to bear if there isn't a lot in the immediate area. At Beacon House, our first operational Pallet village, there is also a shelter on-site with a kitchen, where folks come in and cook once a week for all the residents of the village and of the shelter. What we need to provide there is a bit different than in another location where we would bring meals in, for instance, if there weren't accessible meals on-site.

We look for things - we talked about water and sewer - really making sure that folks have dignity where they're living. I think we sometimes get asked about locations. Sometimes it comes with the idea of putting people as far away from other people as possible, and that's certainly not what we want. We are not in the business of warehousing people. We want people to be part of communities and have access to services, just like all of us would want.

SUSAN LEBLANC: We've been concerned about the Essentials rate for people who are unhoused or living in shelters, which is about \$380 a month. Associate Deputy Minister MacIsaac, can you tell us how many individuals are currently receiving that rate in the province?

CATHY MACISAAC: If it's okay, I will ask Ms. Ley to respond.

SUZANNE LEY: I don't actually have the number of folks who are receiving Essentials in front of me, but we can follow up. If I don't find it in my binder by the end of today, we can follow up with that answer.

About Essentials, as you mentioned: when we're looking at somebody for income assistance support, we look at household type, we look at type of accommodation, and we look at how many people are in the family. The Standard Household Rate that somebody receives really depends on all those things. Folks in temporary accommodations, be it hospital or shelters, as you mentioned, they receive an Essentials rate of \$380 a month. Part of what we look at are the other resources that folks have access to if they're in those places, and the cost of those things compared to somebody who's renting a house, and that kind of thing.

That being said, our department always looks at cases, if there are questions, on an individual basis. We're always happy to look at things like special needs and assessing how we can help individuals and clients.

SUSAN LEBLANC: I remember when the Essentials rate came in or got a little boost a couple of years ago. It makes sense to me that if someone is housed and having all their meals provided that perhaps they don't need as much. Many of the people who are getting the essentials rate are living in tents in tent encampments and have zero services except for the goodness of hearts of the neighbour people who come and bring meals everyone once in a while. There is a major difference in some of the situations. I wonder if there's a look to that.

I'm also wondering if the department has done any work on estimating the annual cost of increasing anyone on essential rates to the Standard Household Rate - Enhanced. Has any of that calculation been done?

SUZANNE LEY: There were two questions there. If I can go back to MLA Leblanc's statement about the folks who are sleeping rough and living in tents. I just wanted to note that there are some resources available for folks through our outreach teams. We've invested with Shelter Nova Scotia in more coordinated outreach providing some supports to folks who are sleeping rough.

Where it's appropriate, we have options for folks to come in out of the cold. We know that the Halifax Forum still has room, for instance. As we build other pieces that are coming online, like supportive housing. 902 ManUp is opening some new supportive housing in the coming weeks that will also open up some capacity in the system. I would encourage folks, if it's an option for them, to come inside.

About your question about estimating essentials, we are always looking at how we can improve our programs. I think the investments that we talked about earlier in terms of indexing the disability supplement are all evidence of work that the department has done. We're always looking at how we can further support our clients.

SUSAN LEBLANC: If you have that calculation when you're looking through things, that would be great. Considering indexing income assistance rates only cost \$7 million this year, the cost of raising the rates would likely be pretty low.

I guess my question is: What is the rationale for leaving the rates? I take your point about people being provided services, but let's face it - anyone living on \$1,200 a month is living a pretty hard life. It's pretty difficult to survive on that, let alone \$600 which is the Standard Household Rate for a single person, let alone the \$380 for someone living in a tent.

I think that we have to acknowledge in this room that none of that money is enough. It was never enough and now it's especially not enough because of the rising costs of living where cheese costs \$8.00 for 400 grams or whatever. It's just impossible. I just hope we can all acknowledge that.

I guess my question is: What is the rationale for leaving the essentials rates so low?

SUZANNE LEY: As I mentioned, we're always looking at how we can improve our programs and improve the services and resources that we bring to bear for our clients. Any decision around increasing any rates would be up to government through the budget process.

SUSAN LEBLANC: Or the additional appropriations process; you don't always have to wait for budgets. We all know that. Even the Liberals did it outside of a budget process when they increased all the rates by \$100.

Even with the \$300 disability supplement, those receiving income assistance will still live below the poverty line, and I've already said this. Was there a discussion in the department to simply increase the income assistance rate up to the poverty line so we don't have the \$300 extra for people with disabilities and all the different sort of categories? Has there been a discussion to just simply bring up the bottom amount to the poverty line?

CATHY MACISAAC: I would point to the decisions to index and add to the disability supplement and other spending investments to support individuals on low income as an acknowledgement that we want to do more and that more has needed to be done. As we've stated, we will continue to look for opportunities to provide additional supports. We don't stop that work. We're always looking at those.

SUSAN LEBLANC: Does the department track the average rental costs for income assistance recipients year over year?

SUZANNE LEY: I don't have that information in front of me, but we can follow up with you.

SUSAN LEBLANC: You don't have the actual tracking, or you don't know if you track?

SUZANNE LEY: The latter.

SUSAN LEBLANC: Here's my supplementary question for either answer: If you do track - and this is for following up - can you tell us the average rental cost for the recipients this year compared to last year? If you don't, how can you ensure recipients can afford to pay their rent?

I would suggest that most of the folks we serve in our office and who are on income assistance struggle to pay their rent, even if they are in deep core housing need and get the subsidy. People are struggling to pay all the bills and make all the ends meet.

I want to ask one more question, and then I'm going to turn it over to my colleague. We understand income assistance recipients can also receive support for security deposits when they move into new apartments. Are there limitations to that program?

SUZANNE LEY: That is another piece I'll have to follow up with you on. I know we have access and can support when folks are able to secure housing and need a deposit. In terms of what the parameters are and if there are upper limits to that, I am not certain, and we'll have to follow up.

SUSAN LEBLANC: I think there used to be because before the standard household rate, there was this idea that we won't give you a deposit for more than this because it suggests you're living above your means, as it were. Anyway, it would be good to know where that is.

I'm also wondering if there are additional supports for income assistance recipients transitioning from being unhoused to housed. Of course, if someone is unhoused, they've probably gotten rid of anything they had when they were housed, like beds, furniture, and those kinds of things. Is there extra money available for someone to set up a new apartment when they can be housed?

SUZANNE LEY: As you mentioned, there are supports for folks when they need things like a damage deposit - things like that. There are supports for individuals if they need to purchase additional furniture - for instance, if somebody needs a couch or a bed they don't have. We also have lots of wonderful service providers who are on the ground working with clients. Typically, if somebody is unhoused, an advantage of them being connected into the department and into a housing support worker is being able to connect them with other resources, whether it's DCS income assistance or all the other resources service-providers bring to bear in supporting folks in that transition.

SUSAN LEBLANC: It would be great if we also knew - when you're following up on things - if you can find out if there's a cap to that, like up to \$1,000 or \$200 for a bed, but then you must go to Parker Street Food and Furniture Bank for everything else.

Last question, I promise: When individuals transition from homelessness into an apartment, what's the process for switching the individual from the essentials rate to the standard household rate? Is the change immediate, or is there a lag time?

SUZANNE LEY: It's a question I asked early in my time here at DCS. I understand it happens quite quickly. An individual needs to reach out to their caseworker and can be switched fairly quickly from essentials into standard household rate. That's also when

they're able to access other things, like a deposit for their new housing. Again, hopefully that person is connected in with a housing support worker and some of our other service providers who can bring other resources to bear, as well.

[9:45 a.m.]

THE CHAIR: MLA Hansen.

SUZY HANSEN: My questions will be directed to the Department of Municipal Affairs and Housing. The last time we heard an update, there were over 7,500 Nova Scotians on the wait-list for public housing. Can you speak to the average wait time in this instance?

BYRON RAFUSE: Certainly I can. Just let me pull that up while we're talking. You're right, the wait-list does stand around - 7,300 is the number we're working right now. To give you a sense about the average wait times, I can give you the provincial and then also broken down by region for you, if you like. Right now, in Halifax Metro, the average wait time on the list is 2.3 years. In Cape Breton, it's 1.4 years; western is 1.9 years; northern is 1.9 years. If you average that out over our wait-list, the average on the wait-list is two years across the province.

SUZY HANSEN: From our understanding, women and children fleeing domestic violence are prioritized on the wait-list. What is the average wait time for this specific demographic?

BYRON RAFUSE: They are prioritized. We have a number of types of cases that we put on our priority list. I would be remiss in not saying that those wait times that I mentioned to you, on average, have gone down over the last couple of years. The team in Public Housing has been working tirelessly, either through our turnaround time to make units more available more quickly - that reduces the wait time list, or the time on the wait-list. Also, you need to recognize that sometimes units are - can or have to be - vacant for a significant time as we do a rehabilitation between tenants and the like. We are endeavouring, and we do metrics on turnaround times that allow the wait times to go down.

Currently there are types of individuals on our priority list, and those experiencing family violence are one of them. Others include people who are homeless, those in need of sustained health services, and people who are inadequately housed are basically our priority listing.

Right now, as of December 1st, there are 151 applicants on our priority wait-list. The average for the priority list is approximately 1.4 years.

SUZY HANSEN: I'll just skip through. It was great to hear that our Premier recognized that gender-based violence is an epidemic in this province, but to date we have not seen epidemic levels of funding to address the pressing matter.

Can you provide us a timeline or when we can expect to see greater levels of funding to support women leaving abusive partners, especially as it relates to housing? I'm basically saying, is there a possibility of creating something on the side of a stream that is specific to domestic violence or gender-based violence, so that the priority is not a year - I mean, the wait-list is not 1.4 years? I understand that you're working extremely hard to get units back up, but I mean, when we think about...(interruption).

THE CHAIR: Order. Now we will move to the PC caucus for questioning. MLA Sheehy-Richard.

MELISSA SHEEHY-RICHARD: Thank you, Chair. I knew it was me, but you didn't know it was me. Sorry about that.

I just want to change gears a little bit. I noticed during Estimates - lots of hours to listen in and tune in and learn things - that there was a substantially big increase this year in the budget. I was wondering if you could talk to me about what programs might have seen some of these increases, receiving the funding, and maybe some of what those key priorities and investments were?

THE CHAIR: Associate Deputy Minister MacIsaac.

CATHY MACISAAC: As I mentioned earlier a few times, there have been some really historic investments in some of the programs - investments in all our programs, but some really substantial, life-changing investments, for example, to implement the Human Rights Remedy. That is really a generational change in the way we support people who have disabilities to live in the community and thrive. We continue to make investments in the foster care redesign, which is providing additional supports to foster families and supporting children who live with foster families with becoming integrated and part of a solid family in the community.

For the income assistance program, we also have the \$300 per month disability stream, which does benefit 60 per cent of the clients who are currently served by that program. There have been some substantial investments. Any one of my colleagues here could speak in detail about any of those, if there is one you wanted to follow up on.

MELISSA SHEEHY-RICHARD: No, those are good notes I grabbed from there. I want to also ask - our CAs are more engaged when they're working on the case work, and sometimes MLAs aren't as connected simply because we're maybe other places or not the first person who answers the phone calls. When we talk about employment and support

services - I know they're important - can you explain in more detail why that program is such a key to the fundamental parts of everything?

CATHY MACISAAC: If it's okay, I'll ask Ms. Ley to speak to that. That falls under her portfolio.

THE CHAIR: Ms. Ley.

SUZANNE LEY: I love to talk about this part of my portfolio. We're trying to do two broad things with our employment support services. One is to reduce the labour market barriers and help increase participation for income assistance clients. As ADM MacIsaac mentioned earlier, one of our goals is self-sufficiency and independence. The other piece that's important for us is thinking about prevention and early intervention for youth who are connected to the department or who are at risk of connecting to the department, trying to position so we can break the cycle of poverty - that intergenerational, pervasive piece around poverty - and positioning youth for success to get on the path of self-sufficiency.

We have a range of programs for youth and for adult clients on income assistance and act in a continuum of supports. It could be making connections for youth as young as 12 in community with service providers who are on the ground - youth who may never know the program is funded by DCS - and trying to break down that stigma to attach youth to programs that will help them gain skills and build independence. We have great programs supporting them on a pathway to education, for instance.

The programs all build on each other. We have great stories of individuals who went through our Career Rising Program, for instance, which connects folks to employment in their community. While they're making a wage working in the Career Rising Program, there's also a fund that can bank essentially \$1,200 a year for the individual to put toward future education. If somebody goes through Career Rising multiple years in a row - you can go through three times in the Summer program - you can earn up to \$3,600 for your education.

We see clients who go through Career Rising, and then they may attach to our Inspiring Success Program, where individuals are hired by a government department and provided with that public service experience. Then we have programs like Education Works, which connects folks into education - we pay 50 per cent of the tuition and 100 per cent of things like health coverage and books. If somebody has gone through Career Rising then gone into this program, they've also got that education piece they're taking with them into - the funding piece they've already earned into this program.

We have great stories of individuals who have gone through each of those programs then come out at the end of that and have great careers: social workers, CCAs, ECEs - lots of good pieces there. Good stories where things like, we've got three siblings who have gone through the continuum of supports, and then because the mom in the family, for

instance, sees what her children are able to achieve, she's then been engaged with our Employment Support and Income Assistance program and is on her own path to self-sufficiency. Some really great stories of resiliency and breaking that intergenerational cycle of poverty through our ESS programs.

MELISSA SHEEHY-RICHARD: Changing gears a little bit, I'm particularly interested in youth involvement and peer support, and we have a great organization and policy that does a lot of harm reduction training and peer support reaching those in their place of need. Can you tell me a little bit about the history, how the EDGE program, does that intertwine in there and explain - again, a learning session for me today - explain the EDGE program and in that lens of peer support.

SUZANNE LEY: EDGE is a really great program and one that I'm always happy to talk about. It started a number of years ago, really trying to bring different resources to bear for youth who are attached to IA or attached or attached to the department. It was built with youth and by youth, taking that human-centered approach so that folks are really getting the resources that they need.

It is meant to be a one-door approach, so youth can come in and access pre-employment supports, post-placement retention supports, and they're delivered, as you mentioned, in peer groups with individual mentorship baked in. It's open to youth 18 to 26 who are job ready, or job search ready or on that path. It started with a handful of sites and now has expanded to six sites across the province, with a new virtual option started last year.

It's about trying to help youth attach and be ready to attach to the workforce, bringing everything that those youth need to the table to get them there - really taking that holistic, wraparound support approach. It's delivered in peer groups with all of that mentorship baked in.

I mentioned virtual EDGE as one of the pieces we've added in the last year or so. It's been really great to actually open up access to the EDGE program to folks beyond the physical sites. There were 24 participants last year in virtual EDGE and they span across the province in really rural communities, so great for them to be able to connect in to the EDGE programs, and certainly has increased things like literacy skills. As part of the EDGE program, we're also connected with an organization called GEO Nova Scotia - Getting Everyone Online - which is helping to bring down those technology barriers for individuals who need those extra supports to be able to attach digitally to our programs.

MELISSA SHEEHY-RICHARD: Since it's expanded and that was sort of what I was getting at - because when you get in rural Nova Scotia, it's very difficult, there are not as many services and it's hard to reach the youth. That's why I'm so grateful for the work that the POSSE Project does in my community. I call them the experts of all things.

[10:00 a.m.]

Has there been a chance to have any feedback of how, even a comparison of how they're feeling on the virtual? Have you had feedback?

SUZANNE LEY: Yes. We do participant surveys after every run of the program, after every peer group. The feedback that we've received is very positive. Folks are feeling like they're getting the supports that they need, like they've got a safe space to come and learn and grow their skills. I actually have a list of locations where individuals from the virtual program are located. Again, places like Cross Roads Country Harbour, which I'm not actually sure where that is; it's in the Northern Region. But able to connect folks from lots of different places like Tusket in the Western Region into the EDGE program and allowing them to connect and build skills in that way.

MELISSA SHEEHY-RICHARD: One more question on that: Have you made any changes from the feedback already, or is it working as planned?

SUZANNE LEY: Always evolving and looking to our service providers. Really, they're the ones telling us what the youth need on the ground. Each program may look slightly different, depending on what the youth actually need that are in each peer cohort, and we're certainly expanding the program. It continues to grow because of the feedback we've received and how it's working, and the success that youth are having coming out of the program.

MELISSA SHEEHY-RICHARD: I just have one more quick one before I pass it over to my colleague, MLA Taggart. Just so that I'm aware - because I think this is great and I've got someone in mind to send this way - is it a requirement of the program for income assistance recipients only, or is this for any at-risk youth who might benefit from the program?

SUZANNE LEY: I believe both.

THE CHAIR: MLA Taggart.

TOM TAGGART: My first questions are for the Department of Community Services. I guess I want to start by saying that you folks are doing a great job in a lot of very, very difficult situations that most of us don't fully understand.

Either ADM MacIsaac or Ms. Ley commented that they'd like to talk more about the Path Program. I would love to hear more about that program, if I could, please.

CATHY MACISAAC: I will pass it over to Ms. Embrett for more details, but I will say that is a program that is one of those ones that we consider life-changing.

THE CHAIR: Ms. Embrett.

TRACY EMBRETT: I'm very happy to be here today, and very keen to talk about the Path Program. I work in the Child and Family Wellbeing Division, which is a program previously referred to as Child Welfare. We are really trying to transform the services and programs that we have to focus on child and family and community and keeping families together.

There are times when a child is not able to remain with their family. If they've experienced abuse or neglect, or are at significant risk of that, we will look to supporting them with other family members and in community. When a child does have to come into the care of the minister, we look for permanency and adoption. Unfortunately, that is not always the outcome for some youth in care, and they may transition to adulthood from care.

We have recognized needs. Our legislation identifies a child in care as up to the age of 19. It can be extended in some circumstances up to the age of 21. In the cases where young people transition to adulthood out of the care system, many of these young people face barriers - financial barriers, emotional barriers, housing challenges - before they really have a chance to understand the steps they need to take to be successful as a young adult.

The Path Program was launched January 1st of this year. Essentially it is a funding and support program so that when a youth in the minister's permanent care and custody reaches the age of majority - either 19 or 21, if they are in a post-care and custody agreement - then these young adults previously did not have any access to supports or services from the department. The majority do not have an extended family to fall back on, like so many of us have been fortunate to have in our lives. Those natural extended supports may not be there for everyone.

In recognition of those challenges that these young people face, we created the Path Program. The goal of the Path Program is to ensure that eligible youth have equitable opportunities to access services, to support safety, health, and opportunities, as well as connection to community. As a youth transitions at the age of 19, there is a financial payment system, and I'll talk about the financial piece first.

There is a financial payment system where the youth - all they have to do is register with us and we confirm that they were a child in permanent care and that they were in permanent care when they turned 19 or 21. They are eligible for financial payments bi-weekly until they turn 25; it's a six-year window. At the age of 19, their financial payments - I forget the exact math. I think it's \$700 or \$800 bi-weekly, but it equates to \$20,000 a year. There are no qualifying assessments for it. It is not income-tested. It is not needs-tested. All children who transition from care to adulthood are eligible for these.

In the second year of the program, the amount that they will receive is \$18,000 a year, and each year it decreases \$2,000 a year until it's \$10,000 a year, when they're 24

years old. The critical point about it not being income-tested and not being needs-tested is that it's not considered taxable income or reportable income. We have a technical interpretation from CRA that it is not reportable. The offset of that is Employment Insurance. It's not income, it's not employment income, so it doesn't need to be reported for that as well. It's a significant financial support for these young people.

In addition to that, there is also Youth Outreach. We have partnered with Family Service of Nova Scotia, a wonderful organization that provides a lot of support to individuals in need, and they will provide outreach supports to these individuals the entire time they are in the Path Program. They have set up a 24-hour phone line specific just for young people in the Path Program. They can reach out for support, even additional supports. There could be some financial needs or situational needs, and we will work with them to ensure that these young people who don't have the safety net that a lot of young adults have - we will do our best to work with the service provider to create that.

There are check-ins every three months with Family Service Association for the first two years - I believe it is the first two years - and then after that it would be every six months. We just want to make sure the young people are doing well. It could be they don't want to engage with Family Service Association, they just need to have a quick phone check-in: Yes, I'm good. There could be some youth who meet with them on a regular basis; it could be weekly, it could be virtual. Family Service Association has employees all over Nova Scotia, so there could be some in-person as well, if needed.

THE CHAIR: MLA Taggart, with 30 seconds.

TOM TAGGART: Thirty seconds. Well, I thank you very much for that answer and I look forward to continuing when our time comes around again.

THE CHAIR: As the time comes around again for the second round of questioning, we have 13 minutes, and we'll start with the Liberal caucus. MLA Clark.

BRAEDON CLARK: Deputy Minister Rafuse, I just want to ask you about a recent announcement from the federal government of a new Housing Infrastructure Fund - a \$6 billion fund in total - \$1 billion of which, I believe, is dedicated for infrastructure - pipes, and all those components that are necessary when it comes to building new housing - and then the other \$5 billion for housing support.

Unfortunately, in my view, some provinces so far have expressed skepticism of this and have said that they aren't sure if they want to sign on to that program. I believe the deadline is January 1st of next year, so in about seven months. The federal government has said that if provinces don't sign on, that funding will then go directly to municipalities. I'm just wondering what the department's view is on that program and is the expectation that we will sign on with the federal government by the first of January next year?

THE CHAIR: Deputy Minister Rafuse.

BYRON RAFUSE: Yes, through a series of announcements before the budget and with the federal budget itself, the federal government did announce these programs. For clarity, it's \$1 billion directly to the municipalities for infrastructure and the following amounts could be infrastructure money as well.

The federal government has indicated a number of what they refer to as conditionalities to this money. They have not provided complete details about those conditions. Some were spoken about in the announcements - adoption and adherence to building codes and the adoption and adherence to housing and infrastructure for housing.

As recently as last Friday, we were in conversations with the federal government, as all PD partners were, looking for further clarity on what those conditions will be and how those programs will work in conjunction with those conditions.

A lot of them, as you might have read, may have sounded very familiar because they are existing programs that some provinces already have. Are they enhancements? Are they stacked? Are they replacements? Those are the types of details provinces need to have that clarity before we can recommend the provincial government signs on.

The federal government was not yet in a position to provide those details to us. They understand that they need to do so. They have indicated that the January 1st sign-on date is a reality. The reality is that it's there because they want to flow money in the fiscal year, but they're not in a position to give us all the conditions, nor how the programs work. It would be impossible for us to say that we're going to sign on.

I can tell you that we have great alignment with those programs with our existing five-year housing program that the province has previously announced. A lot of the programs are ones that we may have been given credit for doing, and just further enhanced at a national level. There is great alliance there, but we just need clarity around those conditionalities and what they mean to us as a province.

BRAEDON CLARK: That makes sense, I think. Just to clarify, so that I understand, the department - at this point in time, anyway - has not closed the door on signing off on this proposal by January 1st. You might not be able to say, Yes, we're absolutely going to do it today. I appreciate that, but it sounds to me - and correct me if I'm wrong - like it's certainly an open discussion and the door is not closed on that front.

BYRON RAFUSE: That's certainly how I would characterize it. As I said, there's great alignment on a lot of these programs with our five-year housing program. There are some conditionalities, like tying things to housing and infrastructure, which align with our own thinking on those types of things. We just need to have a complete understanding of what that means.

As you said, their first billion dollars will go directly to municipalities. That is problematic from a number of perspectives, for some provinces more than others, because of the lack of clarity about whether or not when something goes directly to a municipality, is there an expectation for the province to participate in that? Does it align with our priorities?

As I said, we just need to have clarity on all those things. It is in great alignment with our program. These types of investments, we would agree, are what's needed to expedite the housing infrastructure, transportation corridors, and transportation system enhancements that are needed to address the housing crisis.

BRAEDON CLARK: I haven't seen this reported publicly. The deputy minister may know, or he may not, I'm not sure. Do you have any sense of what the dollar figure that Nova Scotia would be eligible for under this program would be, roughly?

BYRON RAFUSE: You can do the straight math to get a percentage that we normally participate in. I don't have that. I don't want to use that number for a number of reasons. We haven't been given clarity about whether or not the allocation will be done on a province basis and the basis of that allocation.

There are certainly some programs in there that are application-based, which are not allocated equally from province to province, as has been the case in the past where, under the HAF funding, our allocation was not indicative to our population allocation. So no, we don't have clarity about how much is coming to us, and that's a further refinement of details that the federal government needs to provide.

BRAEDON CLARK: I appreciate that clarification. I wanted to go back to DCS here and just ask the Pallet shelter question again. As we know, in some cases there has been some pushback from local community members on this issue. I was dropping my kids off at the Sackville Sports Stadium on the weekend for swimming and skating lessons, and there were people there with signs, which is not great to see, I would say. It's unfortunate that happened. I know there have also been some issues in Whitney Pier, up in Cape Breton.

I'm just wondering: From the department's perspective, how do you learn from that experience? We talked about this yesterday in Natural Resources and Economic Development Committee: There is always very broad support for an idea and a concept when it's brought and then when it becomes specific, sometimes that changes when people realize that it may have an impact, real or perceived, on them. That's a hard thing to overcome.

I'm just curious what the department has learned from these first few experiences to hopefully in the future roll these out - you're never going to get a 100 per cent buy-in - but to get the support level that I think is there. How do you deal with that issue going forward?

CATHY MACISAAC: I'll defer to Ms. Ley.

SUZANNE LEY: In all the work we do on housing and homelessness and supportive housing, we try to balance the need to move very quickly - I don't think I'm exaggerating when I say to move quickly to save lives in many cases, to provide folks a roof over their heads, stabilization, and an opportunity to get back on their feet - balancing moving as quickly as we possibly can. To your earlier question about how quickly we can get things built - with the needs and concerns of communities. I understand that when their community changes folks have questions, they have concerns. In all the work that we do, and certainly what we've learned since I've been here for a couple of months, is really cemented in being a good neighbour and taking a good neighbour approach to the work that we do.

Addressing concerns, for instance, as we can and as appropriate as they come up. We often hear from members about concerns in the community. We had a recent example, not with the Pallet village but with another part of our work, where there was a concern from a member about residents of a shelter smoking in a bus shelter. Very quickly, we took that back, had a conversation with the service provider. We were able to provide them with the resources they needed and they're building a smoke shack on their property. It's things like that, trying to be really respectful and hearing concerns.

In Sackville, we've had conversations with Beacon House. They have built mechanisms that folks can reach into them. We've had conversations with RCMP and with others who - again, not to exaggerate - characterized their responses as really pleased with the work that's happening and how folks, as they're given an opportunity to stabilize and get access to resources and all of the wraparound supports that being on that path to permanent housing really helps with.

I get it. I understand that folks have concerns when their community changes, so really trying to take that good neighbour approach of - just like we all would in the places where we live. If our neighbours had concerns about something happening in our space, we'd take those seriously and try to be a good neighbour.

THE CHAIR: MLA Clark, with about two minutes left.

BRAEDON CLARK: Time's flying. I appreciate that. I said this yesterday, but we were talking about wind turbines - same concept. I think it's human nature to be afraid of change and to be leery of things that you don't know, and speculation and rumour and all of those things. What can dispel that often quite quickly is reality and having something on the ground and things happening. I know the site, the village out there in Sackville, has been open for I think over a month now. That's good. People get familiar, and then life goes on in the vast majority of cases. I really appreciate that answer, and I think it's valuable as an example moving forward.

Last question: I mentioned in the previous round that there was some space available at the Halifax Forum right now - how many beds are occupied versus available at this point in time there?

SUZANNE LEY: It can change daily, but as I understand it - I asked the team this morning - there are 19 beds currently vacant at the Halifax Forum. We also know there's capacity in other parts of the system as well, so there are beds available for folks to come in out of sleeping rough to have those opportunities. I also mentioned earlier that we have more supportive housing coming on the line in the coming weeks. Certainly as Pallet villages open up, it will free up beds in the Halifax Forum and in other shelters. We have a number of them across the city, as you would know, and in other parts of the province. Again, on that continuum, as we open things down the line, it frees up space for folks to come in from outside.

BRAEDON CLARK: I presume I can't have much time left, so I just want to thank everybody for being here this morning. You're doing very important work very well. I just want to thank you all for being here and for answering our questions this morning.

THE CHAIR: We will now move on to the NDP caucus for 13 minutes. MLA Hansen.

SUZY HANSEN: I'm going to back to the Department of Municipal Affairs and Housing. There are currently 11,202 public housing units across the province, and we know that most of our public housing units are quite old, with an average age of over 40 years. I just have a couple of numbers that I wanted to know about. How many of those units are currently out of use due to repair, and are there any public housing units beyond the point of repair? How many of those are there?

BYRON RAFUSE: Yes, there are some that are beyond repair, and we'll make decisions on that as we go forward. You have noted that recently one of the modular units we were able to place in a location was to address a unit that was beyond repair through damage. Currently, our vacancy rate hovers around - let me find the exact number here, but I believe it's around 1 per cent. Three per cent. That's due to turnover and the like across the board.

I just want to clarify an answer I gave to you earlier around the priority access list while I have the opportunity. I gave you a rate that was for all people on all access rates, not the individuals who are on the family violence priority listing. I don't have that with me, but I can endeavour to get that for you, if we track it by that subcategory.

SUZY HANSEN: As you had just mentioned, some of the modulars that were created are replacing some of those old units that are not usable. We know that there was an announcement of 247 public housing units, and you just explained that some of them

will be replacing that. Is that the case with the 247? Do you think that that would be a fair number that will be replacing the units that are not repairable or in disrepair?

BYRON RAFUSE: When we use that number, that is our net new number that we're using. We wouldn't count the replacements, because they're already in our existing count. The modulars would be new. Some of the ones we spoke about that had already put in place would cover some damaged ones, but that 247 is our net new on top of the 11,200.

SUZY HANSEN: We've heard from service providers that applicants who are experiencing homelessness must include a signed support agreement with a housing support worker. Whether the applicant needs additional support or it's an affordability issue, they need this agreement, or the application will be denied. Can you confirm that is accurate?

BYRON RAFUSE: Are you asking about people who are on the priority homeless list or generally?

SUZY HANSEN: I'm asking about when they need to connect with a housing support worker for that agreement.

BYRON RAFUSE: I believe it is a requirement. The reason is that when we have individuals, we work with our counterparts and our partners in The Department of Community Services for individuals who come into our public housing unit off those lists - priority homeless lists and the like - so there would be a requirement to say they are attached to a support worker. It's not to be punitive; it's to make them more successful as they move into public housing units because, as you know, that is an environment where you are less likely to be successful if you don't have the supports and you are dealing with certain issues.

SUZY HANSEN: Can you speak to the wait-list for the Canada-Nova Scotia Targeted Housing Benefit? How many are waiting to receive the benefit? How long is the average wait? Is there a priority ranking system?

BYRON RAFUSE: I'm going to hand that over to Ms. Cox-Brown.

KATHY COX-BROWN: To acknowledge, we did have a significant backlog - in 2023, we were in the 1,000 range, I believe. We made some significant improvements, mainly: streamlining the process; building the capacity we needed; being nimble with the capacity; moving our backload from intake over to case, wherever we needed it, to move it back and forth; did some clarity on policy to make it easier to process; and established role clarity, so we were removing a lot of duplicate work.

In February and March, we had about 800 applications during that period. We have about 555 we are currently processing. At this time, intake is looking - last week was mid-March. They're probably in the next week in March now.

We do prioritize some of our housing support. Ones coming from that are prioritized. For example, we have applications in April that have been approved. We received one last week, and they are now receiving an active rent supplement.

The timelines - I think we were quoting two months. We are trying to speed that up. We are planning on bringing in more firm service standards to be able to understand where it goes, but it's dependent on the completeness of the application. We also brought in different processes. If you are only waiting for your banking information, we will process you now right to the end to speed up that process for the individual. If we are waiting for your banking information but know you are not eligible, we are not going to wait for that - we are going to let you know right away. We've implemented those types of procedures as well.

A lot of this credit is to staff. We reached out to staff and asked them how we could speed up the process and what tools and support they need. A lot of the improvements are a credit to staff doing the rent supplement.

SUZY HANSEN: I want to get some clarity on this. I'm glad there have been some changes. Obviously streamlining is important because we know that a lot of folks were accessing this service. What we've heard from housing support workers is that there's not a communication link between the housing support workers and the staff in your department. They are not able to get answers for their clients, so they are waiting the two months and can't find out what is happening with their clients' information.

I'm hoping, within that answer you just gave me, that is something that has changed - being able to make sure the communication is given. When people are in limbo, waiting two months to find out whether they can afford their rent - two months, one week, two weeks - is a long time. I want some clarity on that: Is that a process that's now working?

KATHY COX-BROWN: I do believe that lot had to do with the backlog that we were trying to address, that significant backlog. Yes, I agree, we realized we needed to improve our communications, not just to housing support, but our manager has been doing information sessions. We've tried to improve and understand how our program works. We're looking at other approaches, plain-languaging some of our guides. They're not always clear to our clients. Translation service, we brought that in as well. We're going to translate some of it, just so we're reaching all. It just makes it easier for everyone to access and understand.

A lot of the delays also are understanding what information needs to be submitted. We wanted to make sure that is clear, so we are focusing on trying to improve that. Also,

we're trying to do a one-pager, a very simple thing that we can give to our stakeholders, like housing support, to understand clearly what it is. I have actually talked to the one who takes a lot of the phone calls. It has decreased significantly, because we are speeding up in responding to clients, so they don't have to call, they already know. We're noticing that as well.

[10:30 a.m.]

SUZY HANSEN: I'm going to talk about the Canada-Nova Scotia Targeted Housing Benefit, but it's going to be in relation to DCS. Is the Canada-Nova Scotia Targeted Housing Benefit classified as exempt unearned income for Income Assistance recipients? If yes, is this a full exemption or a partial exemption? If no, does this mean that Income Assistance recipients receiving the benefit have their rates reduced?

CATHY MACISAAC: We're going have to go back, and we'll absolutely get that for you.

SUZY HANSEN: This is going to go back to the Department of Municipal Affairs and Housing. Many who receive a rent supplement from the Targeted Housing Benefit program continue to struggle with the costs. I heard earlier that it's based on the federal, the CMHC rates, and you need approval to be able to change that through policy. I'm curious to know why it's not being calculated on a rent-g geared-to-income basis, because we know that it's such a challenge.

BYRON RAFUSE: Well, first of all, yes, rent-g geared-to-income is the model we use in public housing. It is, I would say, referred to as the gold standard for deeply affordable housing. That is a requirement, as you know, for all new participants or recipients coming into public housing, a standardized rent-g geared-to-income calculation. That's the parameters of that program.

A lot of our programs have different parameters, and I'll ask Ms. Cox-Brown to specify or speak to why we use the current model in the rent supplement program, or the top-up program.

KATHY COX-BROWN: The model that we currently use is that 30 per cent of their income is to contribute to, based on using the AMR. The reason it's used - again, it's a federal program. That is the qualification and requirement. It is a partial benefit for rent, and it's just a federal requirement.

THE CHAIR: You have 17 seconds, MLA Hansen.

SUZY HANSEN: Okay, so we will have to continue this conversation offline, but I will say that I truly appreciate the work that each and every one of you do up here. There

are many conversations we need to have, and I think keeping that line of communication is really key to us being able to assess the need of our clients.

THE CHAIR: We will now go to the PC caucus with MLA Taggart.

TOM TAGGART: Just to finish up on the Path Program, I just have a quick question. At a very vulnerable age, these young adults age out of foster care, and it's great what you're doing, but are there mentors provided, age-appropriate mentors? I'll just ask the question quickly. That's all.

THE CHAIR: Ms. Embrett.

TRACY EMBRETT: Yes, we do have programs. Our Prevention and Early Intervention programming supports children and families at the young age before there may be involvement, during the involvement, and post involvement. We do have youth outreach programs that provide supports, including housing and finding employment, up to age 24, and our Youth Outreach specifically supports pathways up to 25.

TOM TAGGART: How does the department work with organizations to support low-income Nova Scotians toward gaining meaningful employment? What programs do you have there?

SUZANNE LEY: If I may, quickly, I've got two answers to previous questions. There are about 1,200 people who are receiving the essentials rate. MLA Leblanc, I believe that was a question from you earlier. MLA Hansen, rent supplements do not impact income assistance eligibility.

To the question at hand, that goes back to the work we're doing in our employment supports and work around employment support services and early interventions. Again, we're looking at a continuum of supports for adult clients who are recipients of income assistance and trying to do prevention and early intervention for youth who are either attached to income assistance or are at risk of attaching.

We have several programs. We talked about EDGE earlier. We have things like Career Rising and YDI, which is a wonderful program focused on attaching youth in community to supports and trying to get them on a path to build skills for employment and self-sufficiency.

There are two subgroups of YDI funding. One is administered by the Association of Black Social Workers and focused on the African Nova Scotian community, with a range of wonderful projects and programs in that community to attach youth to skills in potential careers.

Similarly with our Indigenous population, through the Native Council of Nova Scotia, there are some great programs being delivered under YDI, all with the intention of building skills, being on that pathway to self-sufficiency and employment, and breaking that cycle of attachment to income assistance.

If I can share with you a couple - I referenced them earlier. I'd like to dig a bit deeper, if I can, into some of the stories I've heard since I joined the department in terms of folks working their way through the continuum of programs and the impact it's had on them and their families.

I mentioned earlier an example of three siblings who participated in our Career Rising program. That's the one where, over the Summer, there's a connection to employment in their communities and gaining education funding as part of that work. They earned wages and earned that post secondary contribution. Two of the three siblings then went on to NSCC with Education Works bursaries, in addition to what they earned through Career Rising.

We've heard recently from one of the siblings, who finished the social services program at NSCC, and another sibling who is a full-time ECE. Recently, the parent of those three siblings also engaged with ESS programming after seeing what their children were able to achieve in being connected and is working in the kitchen where one of the siblings is an ECE. Again, it's important work in attaching and trying to think of what a person needs and what the barriers potentially might be to attaching to the labour force.

I have another example, if you'll indulge me, that I think is lovely. A person who had attached to income assistance after an injury that they suffered - they were no longer able to work in their field, and it really prevented them from being attached to the labour market. In 2022, they started with NSCC with the education to work funding, and some funding from Employment Nova Scotia through the Department of Labour, Skills and Immigration. Then they did two Summer placements in 2022 and 2023 with government departments through our Inspiring Success program. I heard from a colleague in another department whom they had worked with that they had really tried to steal that person - or hire that person - after graduation.

They graduated with a diploma in business administration, and now they have a full-time job. They did not come to work for government, unfortunately, but they have a full-time job working with one of our NGOs, actually delivering one of the programs that DCS has to offer.

Again, what I have learned in my time here at DCS is that we sometimes hear from folks who are at their most vulnerable and are not doing well. We also hear really great stories of resilience and how our programs are impacting Nova Scotians. While I've taken up some time, I appreciate the opportunity to share some of those stories as well.

THE CHAIR: I believe we're going to MLA Boudreau now.

HON. TREVOR BOUDREAU: I'm not normally a member of the Public Accounts Committee at this point. I was asked to sit in today, and I didn't know what the topic was when I was asked. It's a great honour to be here with some people whom I consider tremendous leaders and people who really are caring and compassionate and are doing some great work in the province. No offence to the Department of Municipal Affairs and Housing.

I just want to say that in the short time that I was minister, you understand how broad, how big the department is, and how much there is involved in the day-to-day operations there. I will say that because we're so broad, it's hard to kind of get out the success stories. We often hear a lot about the challenges that are out there, but I will tell you, we have no greater people on this job than are there right now - not only the people here sitting in front of us today, but also our frontline workers, the people who are doing it every day to support Nova Scotians, mostly our most vulnerable Nova Scotians. Full credit to the department and to the staff who are there.

If I had a whole lot of time, I would certainly ask a little bit more about the Mockingbird Family program and all the things and changes that have happened there. I'd probably ask some questions about employment supports and the goal to get up to 35 per cent of people on income assistance on employment support programs, and the great work that's happening there.

I will go to Maria for a little bit, because I know you've been sitting here eager to answer some questions. I'll put a broad one to you here. There's a lot going on with the remedy. There's a lot of great work that staff is doing, and building on that, certainly we can talk about the disability supports - the \$300 per month - that wasn't mandated during the remedy, but that our government said was very important to make sure that we're supporting all people with disabilities.

I'm giving you kind of an open floor, Maria, to talk a little bit about some of the hard work that's going on, some of the challenges, but lots of the opportunities that we have coming in that sector. Good luck.

THE CHAIR: Is there a particular question?

TREVOR BOUDREAU: I would say, with respect to the remedy, there's a timeline. How are things going? What are the next steps in terms of what our department - the department - is doing in that realm?

THE CHAIR: Ms. Medioli.

[10:45 a.m.]

MARIA MEDIOLI: Thank you, MLA Boudreau. I think you felt sorry for me for not having been asked a question. It is a very exciting time for all persons with disabilities in Nova Scotia. It was unfortunate that it ended up with a court case, but the end result is a new beginning, I think, for persons with disabilities across the province.

We have a five-year plan to remedy the discrimination. It touches on many aspects of the supports that persons with disabilities need to live in community. It will support those who are eligible for our program, but also those who aren't eligible. There are six key directions. It involves closing the large institutions that exist in this province, and there are some large institutions where persons with disabilities live. In fact, I'm visiting each of them over the next two weeks to talk about the plans for each of those institutions. Again, the organizations aren't closing. They already provide lots of supports in community. It's just the large buildings.

It's new opportunities for persons who really haven't had a lot of choice in their lives. That's what it's really all about: giving them the tools and supports to make choices about where they live, who they live with, and how they spend their day.

There is the institutional piece, but then there are the other supports. Those supports include additional staff, so we can get those caseloads down so people can engage in a relationship-based way with persons with disabilities in making their choices that include some supports in regional areas. Often, a lot of the supports people need are centralized, and they've been forced to move. It's about making those supports available in their community so they can live in their community of choice close to their family and friends.

Also, when people live in institutions, they aren't able to contribute to their community. They bring so much: the richness, the diversity of experience in life and perspectives. We're missing out when they're not able to live in community and share that with us. I'm thinking of some of the other pieces, the regional supports, and also some new programs. I think that's the other piece. Sometimes we design programs because it's like the system knows best. I would say that the philosophy of the remedy is that persons with disabilities know their life, and their families also know their lived experience, and to give them the tools to design a way forward that makes sense to them and isn't dictated by the system.

I'll say one last thing, because I think that's the most important thing. This remedy really is about the lived experience, and allowing those who have that lived experience, whether it's persons with disabilities or the families to drive the ship, to make the decisions to define their own future to imagine better. We're really just here to support them to do that.

THE CHAIR: You have 30 seconds, MLA Boudreau.

TREVOR BOUDREAU: I'll just close - that's what I was hoping you'd say, and highlighting some of that and the individualized funding and how that's going to shape how things change there as well. I also would say that service providers - and we've talked a lot about them - our service providers certainly play a key role, and those connections that they have to the department. One of the things I heard loud and clear when I was there is...(interruption).

THE CHAIR: Order. I thank everyone here who came and presented as witnesses, and I wanted to ask if there are any closing remarks, let me know. None from Deputy Minister Rafuse.

Associate Deputy Minister MacIsaac.

CATHY MACISAAC: I will be very quick, but I did want to thank everyone for the opportunity to be here today to talk a little bit about some of the programs and services. We are trying to spread the word on some of the newer ones, for example the Path Program, to hopefully get as much participation as possible. We really appreciate it, and we're here today, but as has been stated - we're the face today, but there are hundreds of service providers and staff right across the province delivering this work day in and day out, and we're very appreciative.

THE CHAIR: I know it was very informative for me to hear the comments and the questions. I thank the committee for that.

You are dismissed, and I ask the committee if they're willing to take a recess at this time and for how long.

No need? We're going to continue on with our meeting as our guests are leaving.

For the information, we have correspondence from Nova Scotia Health: information requested from the March 27th meeting. Is there any discussion on it?

Not seeing any, the next discussion, of course, is our June meetings, and the last meeting date for June would be June 26th. We know that's a busy time with all the graduations, so we just wondered, do you want to hold a meeting on the 26th of June? MLA Leblanc.

SUSAN LEBLANC: As much as I love this committee, I do feel like it would be great not to have a meeting that late because of all the different graduations at the different times. There are several that I attend in my riding, and it would be much easier to postpone.

THE CHAIR: There is a motion to postpone the June 26th meeting. The clerk.

KIM LANGILLE: The last meeting would be June 19th. We wouldn't meet again until September.

THE CHAIR: That is what the discussion is now. Is everyone in agreement with that? Anyone wish to speak to it? No? All in favour? Contrary minded? Thank you.

The motion is carried.

On that, our next meeting will be May 1st, and that's an in camera meeting with the Auditor General. The meeting is adjourned.

[The committee adjourned at 10:51 a.m.]