

HANSARD

NOVA SCOTIA HOUSE OF ASSEMBLY

COMMITTEE

ON

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS

Wednesday, May 15, 2024

COMMITTEE ROOM

***2024 Report of the Auditor General: Health, Safety and Well-Being of Children Placed
in Temporary Emergency Arrangements and Child and Youth Care Homes***

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Public Accounts Committee

Lorelei Nicoll (Chair)
Danielle Barkhouse (Vice Chair)
Tom Taggart
John A. MacDonald
Melissa Sheehy-Richard
Braedon Clark
Susan Leblanc
Lisa Lachance
Nolan Young

[Lorelei Nicoll was replaced by Hon. Tony Ince.]
[John A. MacDonald was replaced by Chris Palmer.]

In Attendance:

Kim Langille
Committee Clerk

James de Salis
Administrative Support Clerk

Gordon Hebb
Chief Legislative Counsel

WITNESSES

Department of Community Services

Craig Beaton - Deputy Minister

Tracy Embrett - Executive Director, Child & Family Wellbeing

Shelley Bent James - Executive Director, Service Delivery



HALIFAX, WEDNESDAY, MAY 15, 2024

STANDING COMMITTEE ON PUBLIC ACCOUNTS

9:00 A.M.

CHAIR
Lorelei Nicoll

VICE CHAIR
Danielle Barkhouse

THE CHAIR (Danielle Barkhouse): Order. I'd like to call this meeting to order. This is the Standing Committee on Public Accounts. My name is Danielle Barkhouse. I am the chair for today. I'll remind you to place your phones on silent. I will start with asking the committee members to my right to introduce themselves and their constituency.

[The committee members introduced themselves.]

THE CHAIR: Note that the officials from the Auditor General's Office, Legislative Counsel Office, and Legislative Committees Office are in attendance as well - Gordon Hebb to my left and Kim Langille to my right.

On today's agenda, we have officials with us from the Department of Community Services with respect to the 2024 report of the Auditor General *Health, Safety and Well-Being of Children Placed in Temporary Emergency Arrangements and Child and Youth Care Homes*. I'll ask the witnesses to introduce themselves, beginning to my far left. Ms. Bent James.

[The witnesses introduced themselves.]

THE CHAIR: MLA Leblanc.

SUSAN LEBLANC: When I came in this morning, I noticed that Alec Stratford is here in the audience, as it were. Alec is Executive Director of the Nova Scotia College of Social Workers. I think it's important - I'll say it again, I've said it before - that the social workers or a representative of social workers are a part of this conversation. I would like to make a motion that we amend the witness list for today and add Alec Stratford to the witnesses.

THE CHAIR: Is there discussion?

All those in favour? Contrary minded? Thank you.

The motion is defeated.

I invite Deputy Minister Beaton to make opening remarks.

CRAIG BEATON: Good morning, Chair, committee members. Thank you for inviting us today to talk about the report of the Auditor General in relation to the Health, Safety and Well-Being of Children Placed in Temporary Emergency Arrangements and Child and Youth Care Homes. Accompanying me are Tracy Embrett, executive director of Child and Family Wellbeing, and Shelley Bent James, executive director of Service Delivery for the Department of Community Services.

I'd like to thank the Auditor General and her staff for her review of this incredibly important aspect of our work. As a department, we have accepted all 20 of the recommendations made by the Auditor General, with work on many already in progress.

At DCS, we want to give children the best possible opportunities to find success. Ensuring that children and youth are protected and that families are supported is fundamental to our work. When a child comes into care, all efforts must be made to provide the bright future that every child deserves. The Auditor General's report essentially highlights what we know. We need to improve our efforts to document our work and our actions. Going forward, we will be better at this important aspect of our jobs.

I feel it's important to assure parents of children in care and all Nova Scotians that officials in the department continually assess and take action on all events that could impact the health and safety of young people in care. I have confidence in the dedication and diligence of the DCS staff in ensuring vulnerable children receive the care, assistance, and love they deserve and need. Every single occurrence or incident involving a child in care is reviewed by a social worker, supervisor, and many more.

I also have confidence that youth care homes and the organizations that deliver temporary emergency arrangements provide safe and appropriate support to children. In

addition, DCS has over the past several years made other important advancements in supporting vulnerable children. These include continuing to develop prevention and early intervention programming and expand and enhance existing programs. Prevention and early intervention involves strengthening children, youth, and families, and building their resilience, ultimately negating the need for more intrusive, statutory interventions, enabling us to better support families before they are in crisis.

We are also entering the final phase of redesign of our foster care system. Currently, there are about 700 caregivers who open their hearts and homes to children who need them and we always need more. We are developing a new framework of practice to guide us in our daily work and we are conducting a review of the Children and Family Services Act to ensure it's modern and reflects the needs of the people we serve.

Also fundamental to our success is ensuring that our staff have the appropriate support and resources to do their jobs well. There is no doubt that social workers play a pivotal role. They work tirelessly to respect the integrity of families, avoid interventions that can be traumatic to children, while at the same time ensuring children's well-being and safety. I want to thank our social workers for their incredible work in supporting the most vulnerable children in our province. We are committed to making changes that we will continue, to ensure that social workers have the resources to do their jobs well. It's also my hope and expectation that as we move to a system more grounded in prevention and early intervention, the pressure and workload on our social workers will shift.

I want to assure members of the committee that we take all of the recommendations of the Auditor General seriously. We want to position children well to overcome the challenges in their lives. We want them to be happy and to be productive and to achieve all of their goals. In implementing these recommendations, we will continue our focus on supporting vulnerable children as they grow and find their place in the world. I want to thank you for your time this morning and my colleagues and I look forward to answering your questions.

DANIELLE BARKHOUSE: Thank you for your remarks. We will now open for questioning with 20 minutes per caucus. I will state that when the 20 minutes are up, I will call order and we will move on to the next. We will start with the Liberals and MLA Clark.

BRAEDON CLARK: Thank you, everybody, for being here this morning. I just wanted to ask about the child and youth advocate, the Office for Children and Youth. In the past sitting of the Legislature here in the last couple of months, legislation was passed on this, which I believe is a good thing, but this is something that's been discussed for some time. I have a news story here - I'm not sure if I have to table it or not - from March 2022, over two years ago now, talking about the sense of relief about moving in this direction. Two years later, at this point in time, as far as I know - and I could be wrong; I hope I am, but I don't think I am - there's no child and youth advocate in place in Nova Scotia today. When will that position be filled and when do we expect that office to be up and running

at full speed? I'll direct my questions to you, Mr. Beaton, and then you can stickhandle it from there.

DANIELLE BARKHOUSE: That document will have to be tabled when you're done with it, please, before the end of the meeting.

CRAIG BEATON: I'm going to ask Ms. Embrett to take charge of this one if you don't mind. I will say that I haven't been fully briefed on this one yet, so I actually don't know if we have the timeline, but it's something that we can probably come back to the committee on. Unless Tracy has something else to add, I think that would be the answer.

DANIELLE BARKHOUSE: Ms. Embrett.

TRACY EMBRETT: A colleague of mine within DCS of the executive team is the lead on the Office for Children and Youth. I believe planning continues to be under way and there is a timeline for implementation, but I would like to bring that information back.

BRAEDON CLARK: I appreciate that, Deputy Minister Beaton. I know it's been not long since you've been in the role there. I appreciate that, for sure. It's a lot to start with. One of the things in reading the AG's report and then seeing the response from the department via the minister that stood out to me - I've asked about this and I'm curious what the department's view is. My perception was that the minister seemed to suggest a lot of the issues were due to a lack of documentation or a lack of record-keeping as opposed to things not being done at all. I'm just wondering if the department could comment on that. Is that accurate, in your view? How does that balance out between oversights in documentation, which is a problem, versus things not happening at all, which is much worse? I'm just wondering how that balance plays out in your mind.

CRAIG BEATON: I'm going to ask Tracy to take this one.

TRACY EMBRETT: Documentation of contact, activities and actions when supporting children in care is critically important. We value, appreciate, and respect the role of the Office of the Auditor General and the Auditor General, and recognize that if something is not documented, the interpretation is that it did not occur.

We do have full confidence in the social workers of the Department of Community Services and the work that they do in supporting children in care and families. We have confidence in our service providers, and we have confidence in the system. We feel strongly that the contact with children in care has continued to occur and recognize that there were some occurrences during the audit testing where it was not documented. Again, we will be following up with all of the social workers and ensuring that the importance of documentation is reiterated and stressed, as well as with supervisors, to ensure that during the reviews of files, monthly check-ins and support with the social workers that all of the documentation is in the file.

Ultimately, the Auditor General did make 20 recommendations. We accepted all of them and have begun work on most of them already.

BRAEDON CLARK: One of the things that stood out in the report to me, and I'm sure to most people, is issues around TEAs - temporary emergency arrangements. Given the name, obviously, they're designed to be temporary. I don't know if "goal" is the right term, but four days was kind of the metric at one point in time. Yet according to the AG's report, the average length of stay in these TEAs is over eight months. Why is that?

Ms. Embrett, perhaps? I'm not sure.

TRACY EMBRETT: If I could, I would like to give a bit of context about our involvement when a family or a child does come to our attention, and what happens before a child is brought into care and possibly placed in a temporary emergency arrangement.

I really want to share that the decision to bring a child into care is never taken lightly. The focus of the Child and Family Wellbeing Program and all of our programs and supports through the Department of Community Services is to support children and families in community. We know that the best place for children to be is with their family. That's where children want to be. That's where their parents want them to be.

When there is concern about the best interest for the safety of the child and a decision is made to bring a child into care, it doesn't occur before looking at all avenues to keep a child in their family, including safety planning and possibly a child living with another family or a community member so that they can maintain contact. We can support the parents to address or mitigate any concerns that have been identified. Ultimately, if there is a decision to bring a child into care, it is made following a risk-management conference that includes a number of individuals, usually two supervisors. Then the social workers also gather placement information and look at the needs of the child to identify what the best optimal placement is for that child.

Again - you'll probably hear me mention this often this morning - the best place for a child is with their family or in a family setting. We immediately would look to foster care. We have had a decline in a number of years - up until COVID and certainly during COVID - of a decline in foster caregivers, which has been a challenge. We have been working very hard with foster care redesign and have had significant investments in foster care design, and we've been able to maintain our foster caregiver numbers and increase slightly.

When the needs of a child exceed the needs that could be supported in a foster home, we will look to a child and youth caring program. We have 31 programs across the province that are able to support up to 140 children. If there is not a child and youth caring program that can keep a youth safe or address their specific needs, we do need to rely on temporary emergency arrangements. It is not the first thing that we do. It's after we go

through and review what other options could keep the child safe and have them well supported.

[9:15 a.m.]

Your question was specific to the four days. Because we want to always try to look for a child to be in foster care or returned home to family - I neglected to mention that and I apologize for that. If children are in temporary care, the ultimate goal is reunification. When we do need to rely on temporary emergency arrangements, the initial approval is for four days because we are continuing to look for other placement options. Sometimes there could be movement. Maybe a vacancy could come up in a foster care home, so we continue to revisit all the foster care options and all the child and youth carrying program options. After the four days, there needs to be approval again at 10 days, and then 28 days after that.

THE CHAIR: If an honourable member has decided they've heard enough response, then they will, and I will call order. I ask you to please haul your microphone closer to you. MLA Clark.

BRAEDON CLARK: I apologize, Ms. Embrett. I'm not trying to be rude - I just want to make sure I get to the questions I have here in 20 minutes. I appreciate it. I know that in the report here, it outlines a range of issues with TEAs in terms of lack of available foster care families, increased needs of children, and things I'm sure we'll touch on as well.

In the AG's report here - and I'll just read this because I think this is really important - there are two bullet points here about health and safety risks to children in child and youth care homes not analyzed. The points say, "Over 1,900 critical incidents or serious occurrences that could impact the health and safety of children in child and youth care homes were reported to the Department, but no analysis completed to determine causes, trends, or patterns." The next point says, "The Department does not know how many allegations of child abuse or neglect were reported by children living in child and youth care homes."

I guess my question is: How does that happen?

TRACY EMBRETT: When there is a serious occurrence or critical incident in a child and youth care program, the policy and the requirements are that the program report that to community services, either the Mi'kmaw Family & Children's Services as a delegated agency or the Department of Community Services within 24 hours and follow up with a written report within 72 hours.

Our case management approach is very child-centred. The focus is on the response of and the needs for that particular incident and that particular child. I just want to clarify that there is absolutely monitoring and a thorough review of what occurred, and there's also a follow-up in 10 days to the specific incident with the child. What we did not have

was a mechanism to pull a summary of reports by theme as requested by the Auditor General. It is a recommendation that we review that and put something in place so that we can do that moving forward, and we accepted that recommendation.

BRAEDON CLARK: Just so I understand, every individual incident that is reported is investigated, and there is a follow-up within the set period of time, as you noted. The shortfall that was identified is that from a meta standpoint, a broad standpoint, the department wasn't able - I guess isn't able this time, although maybe that will change - able to analyze trends, looking across the board and say: Hey, we've had, for example, a disproportionate number of complaints come from Site X. We should investigate that further.

Is that where the shortfall was? I just want to make sure I understand because when I read what I read out earlier, it reads to me as though things aren't being investigated from an individual's standpoint. In your view, that's not the case. Is that right? I just want to make sure I get it perfect.

TRACY EMBRETT: Every single incident is reviewed by a number of individuals, including the supervisor, the social worker, the supervisor, a program practice specialist, and the provincial coordinator of child and youth caring programs.

BRAEDON CLARK: We touched on documentation already, but this is another issue as it relates to TEAs as well, which as we discussed, are being used more frequently and for longer durations than is intended. The AG identified that in a lot of cases - I think there are three or four service providers, off the top of my head, on TEAs - the agreements that are in place are not detailed, not covering all the things that they should cover, and are really not up to standard, given the importance of the work and the care that's provided by those TEAs.

Has that been changed? If not, when will we see changes so that these children, who are living at these places for up to eight months - or an average of eight months - are supported by a detailed agreement that befits the level of care they require?

TRACY EMBRETT: I just want to comment - I believe you may have referenced, or the report referenced, an increase in temporary emergency arrangements, and there's been a significant decrease in temporary emergency arrangements since the audit testing period. The Department of Community Services now has 32 temporary emergency arrangements. I wanted to just share that.

We do have four organizations that provide temporary emergency arrangements. We'll soon be decreasing to three, because one of the providers is in the process going through licensing and becoming a regular child and youth care program.

We did not have service-level agreements with child and youth caring programs or TEAs that were completed and signed off during the audit period. We do have signed service-level agreements with our TEA providers currently, and we will continue to review those on an annual basis. We have met with all of the child and youth caring programs with our plan to have signed service-level agreements with them as well. That is another recommendation, along with how we are funding child and youth caring programs too. The two go hand in hand when we're looking at a service-level agreement.

BRAEDON CLARK: There are significant differences in terms of the per-bed funding that the AG identified in her report as well. For child and youth care homes, the per-bed cost could be \$164,000 to \$335,000. That's double, essentially - a 100 per cent difference site over site with no real explanation.

I'm wondering, why is that? Why is there such a huge difference in the per-bed cost depending on what child and youth home we're looking at?

TRACY EMBRETT: There are a number of reasons why there are differences in funding. There are different mandates that each child and youth care program has. It could be age of child. It could be the specific needs of a group of children. That may require different staffing levels. There can be different infrastructure needs. Some buildings are new. Some are older. Some have mortgages. Some do not.

There are definitely historical themes to funding as well, as well as the mandate and all of the specific staffing needs. I would note as well, when comparing provincially run programs to non-government-run programs, there are some invisible costs that provincial programs don't need to purchase, like finance, payroll, and HR. They use the greater public service for that, so it's not necessarily an equitable comparison. However, in the recommendations, which we accepted, regarding the funding, we will be looking at an equitable funding model for all child and youth caring programs, depending on the children they serve and their needs.

THE CHAIR: MLA Clark with a minute and a half.

BRAEDON CLARK: If could squeeze this in here, Ms. Embrett: You talked about the number of TEAs down to 32 right now, I guess since the audit period, which is good. What was the number at the end of the audit period, and in your mind, what explains the drop there since then?

TRACY EMBRETT: Sorry, I don't have that at my fingertips, but I can get you that number. We had a provincial group of leaders within the department who were reviewing every placement in a TEA. That work has been ongoing and began before the end of the audit period. It's been declining. COVID did have an impact on the number of TEAs we had. In fact, we even had TEAs with no children in them in the anticipation of needing them because of staffing challenges and outbreaks in different programs.

THE CHAIR: MLA Clark with 11 seconds.

BRAEDON CLARK: Nine seconds now. I'll just say thank you very much and look forward to getting some questions in the second round as well.

THE CHAIR: Order, the time has now elapsed. I recognize MLA Lachance.

LISA LACHANCE: Thank you for being here. Obviously, we have lots of very important things that government does, but caring for the most vulnerable people in our province - and I would argue that children and youth in the care of the province are amongst those as one of our most important roles. I appreciate that the department has accepted all the recommendations. I think we all want to do better. We all want to do our best for young people. I think this is not a partisan question at all when I look across the table at my other colleagues. Thank you for being here. We do have some questions with that aim - to understand how we can do better for young people in Nova Scotia.

I will say that I am disappointed that you've come today without being able to talk about the Child and Youth Commissioner. This is something that, certainly, I've worked on for a long time in Nova Scotia prior to being elected. There have been private members' bills tabled, and when the current government formed a couple of years ago, in fact, this was a major part of the mandate letter. I feel like there have been a number of public consultations. This isn't a new issue that showed up in the Financial Measures (2024) Act. It's been ongoing, so I am disappointed that you're not able to talk about the appointment of the Commissioner, the budget for this year, the scope of the regulations, and that sort of thing.

I'm hoping that you can talk about another really important public promise, which is the review of the Child and Family Services Act. The previous review was very limited in scope. Under the Liberal minister's purview, it was limited to three parts of the Act that the minister chose themselves, and there was very limited input from the public. I'm wondering if you can confirm the scope of this current review and the timeline of this current review.

THE CHAIR: Deputy Minister Beaton.

CRAIG BEATON: I think Ms. Embrett will have the most relevant information on this one.

THE CHAIR: Ms. Embrett.

TRACY EMBRETT: The purpose of the Child and Family Services Act is to protect children from abuse and neglect, and to promote the integrity of the family. You are correct - the previous review of the legislation only looked at three sections. It was during COVID, so that was a decision that was made due to needing to focus on COVID

responses for children and families within the child and family division. It is in legislation that it is reviewed every four years, so we are required to do that, and I think it's great that we are.

The review process has begun. The broad public engagements were conducted in the Fall of 2023 to prepare for the review. Feedback from all of these engagements was reviewed, and key themes were compiled into a "what we heard" report. There were more than 250 survey responses and more than 60 engagement sessions across the province, and more than 300 people attended. The committee has been appointed by the minister, and it is made up of internal experts, as well as experts . . .

THE CHAIR: Order. I recognize MLA Lachance.

LISA LACHANCE: We have such limited time, and I think we can all go look at the press release and see who's been appointed. Can you just confirm the scope of the review - will it be the entire Act - and the timeline?

TRACY EMBRETT: Yes, the scope of the report will be the entire Act, and the report will be made public by March 1, 2025.

LISA LACHANCE: I would also like to turn to temporary emergency arrangements. You just said that, in fact, the use of TEAs has decreased since the audit period. I'm wondering if you can tell us why.

TRACY EMBRETT: I'll try to be crisper in my answers. My apologies for being long. There are a number of reasons. During the audit period, we did have a number of foster caregivers on hold - a significant number - related to COVID; 25 per cent of our foster caregivers are over the age of 65, and there was great concern about having children coming and going out of the home and family members. We did have a number of foster caregivers on hold. We also had staffing challenges within our child and youth caring programs where there was continued concern about having to close a program. There were some times where youth were not following COVID public health requirements to not interact outside of their bubble or their groups. That resulted in challenges with them returning to their programs. So we did have a number of youth in temporary emergency arrangements during that time.

LISA LACHANCE: I'm wondering how the use of TEAs matches the use of out-of-province placements. Previously, a lot of times in the most complex situations, young people were placed in programs out of province and I'm wondering: When the use of TEAs went up, did the use of out-of-province placements go down, and has the use of out-of-province placements started to grow again since the end of COVID?

TRACY EMBRETT: We have not been using out-of-province placements for some time. I don't have the number with me right now. I believe the last time I looked we had

three children placed out of province, but that was specifically related to their treatment program. It was not to seek a placement. It was planned for the child. There has not been an increase in out-of-province placements, and that's not something that we look to do for placement.

LISA LACHANCE: Within the structure that you have now within the scope of this audit report, do you feel like we have the resources in the province to support young people with very complex needs?

TRACEY EMBRETT: I do. I probably will ask my colleague Shelley Bent James to respond to the social workers and our ongoing recruitment to get more social workers. This is a really difficult job and the people who are committed to children and families - like you stated in your opening remarks, everyone wants the best for children and families, and the people who work in the field supporting children and youth are very committed to that.

THE CHAIR: MLA Leblanc.

SUSAN LEBLANC: I just want to pick up on the discussion earlier about the TEAs as well, and the licensing versus not licensing. We've heard a lot about the difference between the licensed care homes and these TEAs. We had four providers; now we're going down to three because one of those is becoming licensed. What is the rationale of placing very vulnerable children and youth in homes or places where they are not licensed?

TRACY EMBRETT: The use of temporary emergency arrangements is only when there are no other possible solutions to support a child.

THE CHAIR: Order. MLA Leblanc.

SUSAN LEBLANC: I get that, and yet we know that they're not temporary. There was a retired social worker who presented at the Law Amendments Committee when we were debating the budget, and he said, and I am quoting:

The department has chosen as a consequence to enter into agreements with private entities who provide unlicensed placements to some of our most vulnerable and traumatized youth. The department intends that these be temporary placements, but due to the lack of resources to meet these youths' complex needs, I have known of youth who have been placed in these temporary placements for two, three, and four years.

I understand that the intent is a very temporary, as the Act states, four-day stay, in which case licensing might not be so important, because there are obviously going to be some checks and balances, and there's going to be contact. But when you're talking about

two and three and four years, or even eight months - you said earlier that there's a case conference at 28 days. What happens after those 28 days? How are we ensuring that these very vulnerable young people are safe?

TRACY EMBRETT: The approvals are every 28 days afterward, yes. We are absolutely looking at how we can reduce our reliance on temporary emergency arrangements. We are having active conversations with all of our child and youth caring programs on mandates and how we can work differently with them and how they can help to support children in care.

We want to move away from this. We want children to have regular support. We want children with foster care. We are in the final year of foster care redesign. One of the focuses is recruitment and retention, and we are also going to be recruiting for emergency receiving homes to further reduce our reliance on temporary emergency arrangements.

SUSAN LEBLANC: That's good to know. Obviously, part of this is the ability of social workers to properly do their jobs. You mentioned earlier that you were going to remind or follow up with social workers about their documentation. We've heard from social workers for years - since I've been elected, almost every year - about the extremely difficult situation in which they work. Not only is it that the people they're working are very complex and have high needs and are very vulnerable, but we know that social workers literally can't do their job, because they have too many cases or the cases are too complex or they're always changing - for a variety of reasons. The Act gives a shorter amount of time in which to work with a family.

I guess my question is - and actually, before I ask my question, I will say that we know from the Nova Scotia College of Social Workers that the implementation of the recommendations has unintended impacts. Documentation is important, obviously, but when social workers are having these massive caseloads that they can't manage, through no fault of their own, it's impossible.

What is the plan for social workers? How are we going to support them in their job so that they are supporting families in the best and most positive way possible? I guess to my point, I'd love to know, is there a plan to hire more social workers? Is there a plan for retention of social workers?

THE CHAIR: Ms. Bent James.

SHELLEY BENT JAMES: I think there's no question that social workers in the department are faced with extremely challenging and emotional situations on a daily basis. They prioritize the health and safety of children, keeping them safe from neglect and abuse in this province.

We know that caseloads have risen, and we know that the cases have become more complex. We know we need to do more. We need to be better. We do have a recruitment and retention plan under way. We have added 25 positions in the last few years, bringing the total to approximately 450 in the department, and absolutely, we can always use more. I think it has been said here already that we need to do better for the children in this province, and we wholeheartedly agree with that.

We are currently piloting a paraprofessional role that works alongside social workers and helps alleviate the administrative burden that they are facing on a daily basis. This is freeing up the social workers' time to actually engage with children and youth and families that they are working with. We are also . . . (interruption).

THE CHAIR: MLA Leblanc.

SUSAN LEBLANC: Potayto, potahto, you know what I mean?

SHELLEY BENT JAMES: Thank you for the question. I actually don't have that number right now, but what I can say is for the overall vacancy rate in the department, we are between 6 and 8 per cent, which I think is standard among departments in government right now.

SUSAN LEBLANC: Back to you, Ms. Embrett. How many kids each year age out of the system? Out of TEAs - and that's why the numbers have maybe been going down? Is that - does that contribute? Obviously, it does, but do we see many cases where kids are just aging out and so they're done, or are they actually coming out because they've gotten care that they need and their situation has improved?

TRACY EMBRETT: The numbers of TEAs right now and the age range of children that are in them? No, I would not attribute the decrease in TEAs of young people transitioning to adulthood from a TEA.

THE CHAIR: MLA Leblanc with five minutes remaining.

SUSAN LEBLANC: Oh my god, okay. Well, I might be able to go back to you.

The College of Social Workers also expressed concern about the bigger picture of why many of the report's findings flagged outdated caseload standards within the department and things like inadequate housing and income supports leading to family poverty, and, also, a severe - I don't know if the social workers have said this, but I will say this - lack of mental health care for youth in the province or the underproviding of mental health care. I'm wondering if the department is looking at these social determinants of the situation and if the department agrees with the Nova Scotia College of Social Workers' assertions about the caseload standards, inadequate housing, and income supports?

CRAIG BEATON: Can you just repeat the question? Sorry.

SUSAN LEBLANC: The College of Social Workers has asserted that part of the issue with the child welfare system is that there are more complex cases because of income inadequacy, poverty, lack of appropriate housing, and I am asserting that the complex cases are also possibly due to the fact that we don't have enough mental health care for youth in Nova Scotia. Do you agree with those assertions? If you do, the AG's recommendations don't really tackle these situations or this part of the situation. If you do agree with the assertions, how is the department working to address them?

CRAIG BEATON: I think what I can say is that the challenges are certainly complex, as you've outlined. I do know, just in the first week that I've been in the department, that the team is working across government, working with Department of Justice, working with the Office of Addictions and Mental Health to look at ways that we can support children and youth. I don't know if that answers your question directly, but I would agree that there are challenges that we're certainly looking at addressing and we support the recommendations.

SUSAN LEBLANC: I guess that's my point. The recommendations don't go into the social determinants. What about income inadequacy in housing supports? Are you having conversations with the Department of Municipal Affairs and Housing to say we need public housing, or we need affordable housing opportunities for families so that they are better able to manage the stress of having low incomes?

CRAIG BEATON: The answer - are we having conversations with Department of Municipal Affairs and Housing - is yes. We are in continual contact with Department of Municipal Affairs and Housing and a number of working groups that we sit at and participate in to address some of those challenges.

The other thing that I can outline is one of the action items that was addressed in Action for Health is Solution Six, which is all about the social determinants of health. There are government officials who are leading that work across the department - across departments, pulling people together to look at the complexity of the social determinants of health which I think is what your question is getting at.

THE CHAIR: MLA Lachance with a minute and 10 seconds.

LISA LACHANCE: I'll start the question, and we may continue this on the second round. Regarding incidents and incident reporting, I guess what I would ask is: Are you confident that all serious incidents are being reported within 24 hours? Can youth report incidents themselves, and how do they do that?

[9:45 a.m.]

TRACY EMBRETT: Yes, we are confident that all of the reports are coming through; 1,900 is a lot during the audit period, and those numbers were reported by the child and youth caring programs themselves. They are professionals in this field, as well, while trained and committed to children.

I'm sorry, there was a second part to your question, and I just lost it.

LISA LACHANCE: Can youth also report serious incidents?

TRACY EMBRETT: Absolutely, youth can report serious incidents. They can ask for a form to be completed. They can have a conversation. They can text their social worker . . . (interruption).

THE CHAIR: Order, the time has elapsed for the NDP caucus. It is now time for the PC, and I recognize MLA Sheehy-Richard.

MELISSA SHEEHY-RICHARD: Thank you for coming in today and having this discussion with all of us. It's much appreciated. I just wanted to talk a little bit about foster care because in my own community I know quite a few foster parents and I appreciate the restrictions that we had during COVID because people couldn't even move within and out of their communities - the challenges that they probably faced.

It's not necessarily in the report, but I'm interested to know about - when it comes to the Mockingbird Family Model that's being implemented to enhance it. I'm just wondering how that could benefit - I'm not completely sure of how that's working. I just wonder if you can elaborate a little bit on where that program initiated from and what benefits it might be to these vulnerable youth who are in care?

TRACY EMBRETT: I'm happy to talk about foster care anywhere and everywhere in a hope to entrust more families to open their homes to children in care. The Mockingbird service delivery approach to foster care recreates, essentially, a natural extended family for foster caregivers. We have rolled out - by the end of April, we have 51 constellations in Nova Scotia.

Rather than foster caregivers supporting children and not being in community, or in their communities and not having colleagues or supports by other foster caregivers with similar experiences, we now have these constellations which are made up of 6 to 10 foster caregivers that are in a geographic proximity. Each constellation has a lead home or what we call a "hub" home, and the hub home provides respite to the foster caregivers and the children within the constellation.

The importance of that is that children in care are being supported continually and consistently by people who know them, and people who they know and are comfortable with rather than being moved around anywhere in the province, which would have happened previously. There are also regular gatherings, informal gatherings, there's training all within the foster care constellation. It emulates that extended family, like many people have had, of going to an auntie's or a grandmother's for supper or having someone else pick them up after school. That's something that normalizes the best it can to being in that family unit.

MELISSA SHEEHY-RICHARD: Can you see that, as more of these roll out across the province, that maybe it could help decrease the need for the temporary TEAs, I'll call them because I can't think of the full name. Can you see that as these grow and people come back in and feel comfortable and more supported - for example, sports commitments or something are hard, but if you have that group, do you see that could have an impact on reducing the need for the TEAs?

TRACY EMBRETT: Most definitely. Yes. An example could be that a foster caregiver needs a break and they're - in the old world, there wouldn't have been a respite option for that caregiver to have a break, and now that's built into each of the constellations.

I'm familiar with situations where the hub home stepped in for an extended period of time to work with the foster caregiver and work with the social worker and work with the youth to improve the situation and support the youth to adjust to living within that particular foster caregiver's home. Without that support and that extensive natural support with people the youth trusts, that could be a situation where a youth may end up in a temporary emergency arrangement, because the placement broke down.

MELISSA SHEEHY-RICHARD: I just want to pivot a little bit because, again, we're seeing this exponential growth, and with that comes cultural - I guess I'm just wondering how is the department handling to make sure that youth and children are placed in culturally appropriate settings as well? Are you using a lens when you're doing these placements?

TRACY EMBRETT: Our legislation requires us to ensure that we're culturally attentive in all decision-making. We do - we are actively recruiting foster caregivers from diverse communities. We are also providing specialized training for cultural attentiveness within foster caregivers. There is a huge interest and commitment from all foster caregivers to ensure that they are meeting all of the needs of children in care.

We will also seek to supplement the needs of any children in care or foster caregivers or a constellation with any training information or anything else that could be identified.

MELISSA SHEEHY-RICHARD: I guess I also just - another thing that came up, being the Chair of the Community Services Committee, you hear little tidbits of things but don't get the opportunity to ask the questions as Chair. The Path Program - I was just wondering. I know that it's been instrumental in supporting youth, but could you elaborate on the key components and maybe share some examples of any successes that have been noticed from that particular initiative?

TRACY EMBRETT: The Path Program was launched January 1, 2024, and it is a financial and support program that is available to children who have transitioned from care or a Youth Service Agreement. It extends their support from the department past the age of 19. Youth from the age of 19 up until their 25th birthday are able to receive financial support from the department bi-weekly. It is not income-tested. It is not needs-tested. Therefore, CRA has determined it is not reportable income, as well, so it's not taxable.

It's providing financial support to young people at a time when we know affordability is a challenge. Hand in hand with the financial support is also a support through Family Services of Nova Scotia. There will be regular ongoing contact and touchpoints. They have a 24/7 phone line available specifically for young people who are enrolled in the Path Program. That is answered by a social worker who can also give additional supports depending on the needs or whatever they may be facing.

As of today, I think our most recent numbers - as of a couple of days ago, we have 138 youth enrolled so far in the Path Program.

MELISSA SHEEHY-RICHARD: I'll pass it on to my colleague, MLA Young.

THE CHAIR: MLA Young.

NOLAN YOUNG: I wonder if we could talk about prevention and early intervention. What strategies have the department adopted or are using to help reduce the number of children who are entering the foster care system?

TRACY EMBRETT: Across all programs, prevention and early intervention are absolutely key. We have a full prevention and early intervention continuum that supports children and families before they become involved with our system. Many of the families who are supported, we don't even know who they are, but community does. Some of the supports are available and involved with families while they have involvement with DCS - with Child and Family Wellbeing. Then there are post-care supports as well. An example would be the Family Services of Nova Scotia who are supporting youth post care.

Over the past four years, there have been significant investments in prevention and early intervention - almost \$20 million between 2020 and 2024. The levels of support range in tiers from Tier 1 - there were 27 family resource centres across the province. Many

people in community aren't aware that is a community service supported organization, and they don't need to be as long as the family resource centre is meeting their needs.

We also have more extensive supports. An example would be our Families Plus program where if there is work ongoing with a family and there is evidence or concern that we may need to bring a child into the care of the minister, one avenue is Families Plus where they will have a clinical social worker work very closely with the family. It's not a DCS social worker - it's through a funded service provider. That program has been very successful in having a low percentage of children who have been supported through that program actually coming into care.

NOLAN YOUNG: How exactly is the department collaborating with community organizations to support children and families in the foster care system?

TRACY EMBRETT: We have a full team within Child and Family Wellbeing that is out in community working with the providers. We have over 120 service providers across the province who are promoting and supporting prevention and early intervention. The specialists for prevention and early intervention are often consulted on ongoing cases for children in care just to help identify what else is out there. Very focused on cultural connection as well. We have four service providers who work within the continuum of prevention and early intervention services to ensure that there is a proper and appropriate cultural match because we recognize that not everyone sees themselves in every organization. We are really focused on expanding that as well and are hoping to raise that to eight this year.

NOLAN YOUNG: One more question. I understand there's been a lot of training and support measures that have been in the works with the department that will be introduced for foster parents as part of the foster care redesign. Can you elaborate on this?

TRACY EMBRETT: I get so excited about foster care. Probably one of the most significant shifts for - besides the Mockingbird Family model and having constellations - is the shift to how we provide financial support to foster caregivers. They are volunteers. They are volunteers who are there for children, some often with great need - 24/7. They used to be paid a daily per diem rate and would often get reimbursed for expenses out of pocket after the expenses have occurred. That's not the model that we have now.

In addition to Mockingbird, we have redefined the levels of care, of need, within our foster care system. Foster caregivers are paid biweekly based on the level of support and the training that they've received - either general foster care, specialized, or medical. Based on their training and their competency and the number of children they have, they are essentially block funded. We trust them with the care, love, and support of children, and we trust them with making those decisions as well to support the children in their home.

THE CHAIR: MLA Palmer.

[10:00 a.m.]

CHRIS PALMER: I want to thank all Nova Scotians who selflessly open their homes to children. I actually have some friends who were applying for respite care in the system, and I'm very proud to have given them a good reference. It's very timely to be sitting in on this committee meeting this morning with you.

I'm going to keep following the theme of foster care, if I could, seeing as you like to talk about it so much, Ms. Embrett. I guess you've touched on some of the financial resources and supports provided to family, but could you elaborate a bit more on any of those supports to ensure that those families can meet the needs of children placed in their homes?

THE CHAIR: Ms. Embrett.

TRACY EMBRETT: Another benefit of the Mockingbird Family approach is that all the foster caregivers in a constellation now have one foster care social worker. At other times, the caseload of a social worker in foster care - supporting foster care - would have any number of families assigned to them. Now they're working within a constellation with the same families, supporting the same children. So there's some continuity there, and more familiarity with the foster caregivers and the children.

I can share a really great story that I think is a wonderful success of the Mockingbird Family. Last Summer, one of the constellations - and I do have permission to share this - one of the constellations took the entire group of children on vacation, on a camping trip to P.E.I. They had t-shirts made. The group of children, who have gotten to know each other over a long length of time, got to go on a camping trip with other children who they meet with like you or I, or they would have played with their cousins previously - really recreating that familiarity and that family unit again.

It doesn't really sound like it's groundbreaking, but to shift the system to this model has been a huge investment and is really a logical approach to ensuring that children are supported in a familiar way of a family.

CHRIS PALMER: To follow up on that, some of the changes being made in the system - I'm sure you get feedback from children who've left the system or are leaving the system or families. Can you talk about some of the feedback that you receive from those individuals based on some of the changes that are being made?

TRACY EMBRETT: The feedback has been wonderful. We had trialled the constellation approach for a year with two constellations, one in HRM and one in Cape Breton. We learned from the hub homes and the foster caregivers in those constellations before we rolled out the other 49 constellations. The feedback throughout was very positive. Some of the examples were "We didn't have to ask permission to go to Dairy

Queen or to enrol the young child in baseball,” because the funding was provided ahead of time and the caregivers are making - have the funds to do what’s best for a child and do what a parent would.

Of course, there’s consultation with the social workers and the foster care social workers, but it really has normalized things for the foster caregivers as well. Our foster caregivers - the people who volunteer for this work are not doing it for the money; they’re doing it for the love of children, and we want to make it as easy as possible for them to support and love those kids.

THE CHAIR: MLA Palmer with 30 seconds.

CHRIS PALMER: I guess what I’ll do is I’ll have one more quick question for you when we come back. It’ll be going back to the youth transitioning out of care and some of the supports. I know you’ve touched on the Path Program and some of those financial supports available for them, but I might come back to you in our next round to discuss any other supports for youth transitioning out.

THE CHAIR: The time has elapsed for the PC caucus. We will move on to our second round, which will be 14 minutes each, and we will start with the Liberal caucus. MLA Ince.

HON. TONY INCE: Thanks to everyone who is here. I’d like to also just take a moment and thank all the social workers for the complex and very in-depth work that they do. I have a number of friends and family members who work within the system as social workers, so I am a little familiar with some of the challenges.

That being said, the Auditor General noted that there has been no explanation as to why children are placed in specific care homes. There’s no information or collection tools outlined to the needs of the child. It’s either outdated information or missing information, and department policy does not require documentation to explain placement decisions. Given that the child is supposed to be at the centre of this, can someone explain why there are no documentation with regard to placing a child in certain homes?

TRACY EMBRETT: When a child is placed in a child and youth care program - I’ll speak specifically around child and youth care programs and TEAs, as that was the scope of the audit - we need to do better on documentation. I think that there have been some understood pieces, or some understood actions by social workers specific to placements in child and youth caring programs. To explain further, all the child and youth care programs have mandates. They are for specific needs for children, or specific age ranges, or even by gender, or there may be children who cannot be in the same place together. There are some things that make it onto a documented file and some things that are just known.

That doesn't make it right, but that is the explanation for why that documentation wasn't evident in the files. We have actioned that. We will action that and ensure that there is documentation going forward as to why a young person is being supported in a specific child and youth care program or TEA.

TONY INCE: Is the department keeping track of how many of these children are from diverse communities, like the African Nova Scotian communities or Indigenous communities? Do you know how many African Nova Scotian or Indigenous children are currently in TEAs or in some of those homes?

TRACY EMBRETT: Thank you for that very important question. We do have race-based data now. As of January 2023, we have updated our case management system to be very specific. It was outdated language and very broad previous to that. We have good data now.

I don't have the numbers currently of children in TEAs and child and youth caring programs. I have the data of the number of children in care, but not specific to child and youth caring programs and TEAs, but I can absolutely get that information for you.

TONY INCE: It's my understanding also that - you had mentioned that you had 32 homes? I think that's correct - TEAs?

You can correct me, but I understand that there are a couple of the larger homes, which have a number of staff and everything else - that there is a move to take some of those larger homes and do smaller homes. Is that correct?

TRACY EMBRETT: I think that you might have received information on the Remedy with the Disability Support Program. They are absolutely working on that within their program area. We also recognize that smaller numbers are definitely beneficial for young people in care. We have reduced licence capacity slightly over time, recognizing that it's not necessarily in the best interest of youth, depending on what their experiences have been and what their needs are, to have a large number of them in one place.

TONY INCE: How many of those - will they all be under the same policy in terms of qualifications, expertise, cameras? There are a number of concerns when children are in - ideally, probably the smaller places, where there's not that oversight for those children.

TRACY EMBRETT: There are staffing requirements in all child and youth care homes, as well as temporary emergency arrangements, and qualifications as well. We have confidence in our service providers, with who and how they are hiring, and we are working to support them on a regular basis. We do have a provincial coordinator of child and youth caring programs who is available to consult on equivalency, or she often will review resumes and sit on panels as well to ensure that all staff being hired meet the expectations of the department.

[10:15 a.m.]

TONY INCE: I'd like to just briefly talk about foster care. A number of years ago - I'll go back to 2005 - the Department of Community Services had a real push to try to engage more diverse communities in foster care. That's been a challenge from then until now. Part of that challenge is trust within the system.

What is being done now currently to garner that trust but also to ensure that there are more diverse families? I know up until about two years ago, there was a real challenge. Can you explain what is being done to actually better improve that situation?

TRACY EMBRETT: There is a lot of work to do for the department fully on building a relationship and building trust specifically with the Indigenous and African Nova Scotian communities, most definitely. Some of our longest-standing foster caregivers are from the ANS community, and in fact, Mockingbird Family and a lot of principles in our new framework of practice are based in Indigenous teaching and Africentric social work. We've been very fortunate to have a lot of expertise contributing to that.

As far as recruiting for foster care, we are definitely focusing on increasing all foster caregivers, especially from diverse communities. To inform our recruitment process, we did go out to eight African Nova Scotian communities and sought feedback from community. We just recently finished up of returning to the eight communities to report back on what we heard and what we are doing about it in our print materials and our commercial that was aired in March, I believe, for over two weeks. A lot of local people who were recognized in the commercial were from the African Nova Scotian community.

We rely on our foster caregivers who we have really good relationships with about what we can do better and what we need to do more of. The department has one more session - I believe it's this weekend. We've been doing community cafés each weekend in two different communities across Nova Scotia where all programs that the department has set up. We've been having regular gift basket draws to try to entice people to come out and learn more about community, tell us what's working for them, and what isn't working for them. Also, the expansion of our IDCR - Inclusion, Diversity, and Community Relations - team within DCS. We take their lead and advice, as well, on how we can do better with connecting with community - all communities.

TONY INCE: The Auditor General's report highlights - and a number of my colleagues already referenced the gap from when the child comes into the system to the workers engaging with the youth. That is a huge problem if you've got children who are put into a system, and then there is a real lag in their connection with those individuals who are trying to help them manoeuvre this particular system.

I've just got a comment to make. I'm understanding that at the upper levels, there are decisions that have been made without really engaging everybody through the whole

process. Decisions have been made without the knowledge of what it's really like on the ground. I would encourage the department to really engage everyone and not just occasionally grab a couple of conferences - because you really need to engage everyone: the families, the youth, everyone has to be engaged. This report speaks to me that there's been a real gap in that engagement and how they're looking at doing things for the youth. If the youth are centre, then the youth should be centred in that conversation.

I'm going to leave my . . . (interruption).

THE CHAIR: MLA Clark.

BRAEDON CLARK: I believe I have about a minute, so I just wanted to ask one quick question here. I touched on this in the first round as well: the issue of the commissioner for children and youth and the office, which is critically important. I was just looking through the Act here that was passed in - I guess it would have been early April. The Act hasn't been proclaimed yet, as far as I can tell. Does the department know or have a sense of when will the Act be proclaimed and when will a commissioner be appointed so that the wheels can start turning on this really important office?

CRAIG BEATON: I actually don't have that information right now, so I apologize. I know that some of the committee would have liked to have heard a bit more about the commissioner. However, we were preparing to come, and the staff that I have here with me are specifically to address service delivery and child and family well-being, so I . . .

THE CHAIR: Order, the time for the Liberal caucus has expired. I now recognize the NDP with MLA Lachance.

LISA LACHANCE: I wanted to turn back to some of the content in the report. First, just to preface that I have family members who work for DCS and work in child protection. I've also supported a lot of friends and family through the most complex situations around child needs and child protection. In fact, we have emergency fostered in the past and had young people in our house. So I'm pretty well aware - I have a lot of experience, I would say, especially at the more complex end of things.

One of the things that I noticed in the report is that there was only, I think, one Level 4 home which I think might have been Wood Street Centre, which is not even necessarily - it would be hard to consider Wood Street Centre a home placement. I didn't note if there were any transition homes available. Then also in terms of foster care, how is the Mockingbird Family program being used to recruit Levels 4 and 5 foster families? I know that's really where there was a huge gap in terms of services. That's one of the reasons why young people end up at places like Wood Street - because there aren't foster families who can match their needs.

Recognizing that we have young people with increased complexity, how are we planning for that? Is the plan to have more Level 4 and 5 foster homes? Is the plan to have more Level 4 homes, like child and youth caring homes? What about planning for transition?

TRACY EMBRETT: Really good questions. You are correct. Wood Street Centre would be the only Level 4. It is not considered a home or a program. It's a treatment centre and requires a court order for placement there, so it is quite exceptional in that regard. We are absolutely looking to continue to recruit. We do have specialized foster caregivers.

There are times where, based on the needs of the child and the complexity of what the young person has experienced, that they may need support from a child and youth care program, and all of the professional supports wrapped around the design of the program there. Ultimately, we are continuing to look at mandates, and are very open to how we can start to do things differently and trial things. We've had conversations about "what if." What if youth care workers and child and youth care practitioners who work in child and youth care programs can support foster caregivers in a different way? There are a lot of different things that we are looking at, and we're open to trial anything.

Mandate conversations are continuing with child and youth care programs as we look at equitable funding models and service level agreements, and we'll continue to create different options to support children who need it.

THE CHAIR: MLA Leblanc.

SUSAN LEBLANC: I just want to go back to the conversation we were having around foster care, just for a second. You know, it's such a huge and complex - again, we keep saying this - ecology, I guess is the word. I'm just thinking of the wraparound supports and the help that we offer foster families. Again, it's amazing that we have people who will be foster families.

I acknowledge that there are situations where children must be removed from their homes, but then I think about stories where I hear - and this is reported in the media, so maybe there's more to it - there's a situation where somebody had their child placed in care because they didn't have a bedroom for them. They only had a one-bedroom apartment, and they needed a two-bedroom apartment, so it wasn't appropriate that the child was living in that place, so they were moved or placed in care.

What if we were taking the resources - or even some of the resources that we offer foster families to provide experiences for children - like you were saying, the baseball team or going to Dairy Queen, or the camps that the kids in foster care are getting to go to, or the camping trips. Have we looked at the impact if we place those types of resources with families who are in need? I just want to be very clear. I'm not suggesting that we don't remove children when they're unsafe. Of course, we must do that. What if we were offering

- or even if we put those kinds of resources into parenting classes or supports for people who need them in order to care for their children with complex needs? What kind of work is being done there?

TRACY EMBRETT: Thank you for that really important question, and really important work is under way with supporting families. I obviously can't speak about any cases. I don't recall seeing a story about a one-bedroom apartment. Number of bedrooms in a home does not put a child at risk. Lots of us grew up in shared bedrooms and lots of different circumstances and had great family.

Back to prevention and early intervention and our vast array of service providers across the province. There are 27 family resource centres who can make referrals to other organizations, not necessarily the Department of Community Services. We do have a number of parenting journey programs throughout Nova Scotia as well, connected to the family resource centres. Those are an in-home parenting support program free to families. There could be a referral from the Department of Community Services for that if there are any concerns about the needs of children being parented. We've got a number of programs - Strengthening Fathers program, Nurturing Strong African Nova Scotian Families. We've got a program looking at attachment for children.

THE CHAIR: Order. MLA Leblanc.

SUSAN LEBLANC: I just wanted to also ask about the retention part of social work. Ms. Bent James, you were talking about that you've added 25 new social workers. How do we ensure that they stay? I've heard anecdotally many social workers who will begin in child welfare or child protection, and then it's such an overwhelming job - a very difficult job - that often we see people in child protection for just a few years and then they move on to some other type of social work.

In New Brunswick, we've heard that they're looking at a model where the caseloads are much less - 1 to 10 and 1 to 15 for long-term situations for child protection. I'm wondering if Nova Scotia is looking at that same ratio as part of a retention strategy.

SHELLEY BENT JAMES: Our caseloads, as I had mentioned earlier, obviously are becoming more and more complex. We do monthly analysis on caseload maximums. Right now, there is - I think it has been alluded to a few times - COVID-19 did put us a bit behind. We are working on clearing up some of those legacy files. Right now, caseload numbers are not the true, accurate count of children and family that social workers are working with.

I will say from our recruitment and retention perspective, you alluded to folks coming into the department, particularly in child protection, and then moving on, perhaps to some other opportunities at the social worker level. We have been very intentional on our recruitment with universities that have Bachelor of Social Work programs, offering

compensation to students to complete their placement in the department. This has actually netted us a number of students who have a full-time, permanent job waiting for them upon graduation.

[10:30 a.m.]

SUSAN LEBLANC: I just want to go back to what you just said about, We're not sure. What I understood you just said was that we don't know how many cases each individual social worker has. You said it's unclear. How is that possible?

SHELLEY BENT JAMES: The caseload maximum right now - sorry. The average caseload per social worker is 22.75 cases. Obviously, as I indicated, the 22.75 is indicative of cases that are current and cases that have already had the information and investigations have been completed, but because of administrative burden that has been alluded to here earlier that social workers are under, that they are not able to go - they have not been able to go in and close out those files.

THE CHAIR: MLA Lachance.

LISA LACHANCE: We have so many questions. I wanted to return to issues around transition planning for youth aging out of care - I guess linking to the Path Program. I mean, I think it's clear that that transition is not successful for the large majority of folks aging out of care. The 2022 Halifax Point-In-Time survey of homelessness - people who had a history in care represented 30 per cent of people who were part of that survey.

I think we see that folks are overrepresented in the homeless population. I think we've seen - we know the data around post-secondary education completion and employability. The outcomes have not been positive, and this continues to be a challenge.

I'm wondering: Is there the intent to establish a couple of homes that would be focused on the transition to independence? The Path Program - is it being evaluated? What are the outcomes? If there are 138 people enrolled - and there's one social worker, if I understand? Just wondering about how that program is doing more than providing funding. I think that the challenges are more than funding related.

TRACY EMBRETT: There were a number of questions in there. I hope I respond to all of them.

First off, the Path Program was launched January 1st, so we don't even have everyone enrolled yet. Our numbers are growing, because we need to catch up on - anyone can apply for it who's between the age of 19 and their 25th birthday who transitioned from care or a Youth Services Agreement. We know there are more people out there who are eligible to apply for this.

The financial support at the age of 19 is \$20,000 a year. It's prepaid biweekly, and it is tax free. It's not means- or needs-tested, so if the young person has a job, they still get it. If they are in university and we are supporting them in a Post-Care and Custody Agreement for post-secondary education, we will support them for their education as well as their living expenses. They're still eligible for the Path Program.

We do support young people in independent living arrangements as well. We have not had a program previously beyond care. The age of majority for . . .

THE CHAIR: Order. The time for the NDP caucus has now expired. Now it is the Progressive Conservative caucus. MLA Palmer.

CHRIS PALMER: Ms. Embrett, along the lines of when we last spoke, I was asking a question about the youth transitioning out of care, and my colleague was bringing up some different programs or asking about what other supports were needed - along the same length of questioning that I was going to ask.

Can you get back into a bit more specifics, or anything to add about other supports that are provided for youth transitioning out?

THE CHAIR: Ms. Embrett.

TRACY EMBRETT: Just continuing along with the Path Program, the only criterion to be eligible for the Path Program is that you have met the age of majority of either 19 or 21, depending on when your care status ended or your Youth Services Agreement ended. We also support youth in post-secondary, independent living situations. What's really wonderful about the Path Program is it also doesn't matter where they live. We do know of a number of youth, for example, in Cumberland County who may have family or connections in New Brunswick as well. They don't need to live in Nova Scotia. They were a child in the care of the minister, and this is continued support up until they turn 25.

The additional support besides funding can't be understated. The youth outreach support through Family Service of Nova Scotia. For the first two years of enrollment in the Path Program, there's a check-in every three months, and after that, it's every six months. If there's not a check-in, then we hold onto the funding because we needed to make sure that young person is okay. Some of the support that's provided could be mental health support. It could be counselling. It could be budgeting support. It could be housing support. It could be helping navigate certain relationships in their life. It's whatever the child needs or whatever the young person needs. There's not reporting back to DCS, so there's not an assigned social worker - there's a full team at Family Services of Nova Scotia.

CHRIS PALMER: Again, this has been a great conversation. We've heard some of the challenges, but we've also heard some of the great work you're doing and have full

confidence in your ability to keep moving, and get better outcomes as we're going forward. Thank you all for coming today, and I'll pass it on to my colleague, MLA Taggart.

THE CHAIR: MLA Taggart.

TOM TAGGART: I really want to begin by saying that there have been some great questions. This is a difficult subject, we all know that. I think it's important because there are all kinds of great stories out there of families that have fostered children and done great jobs. I also want to - and I think we all want to - thank the work of your staff and your folks for everything they do because it's got to be very challenging. Certainly, there will be challenges, but I think they need to know that we very much appreciate the work they do. I think probably very mentally challenging work as well. I just want to say thanks for that.

One of the questions I have is: Over time, you have worked with other jurisdictions or other provinces to use their best practices. Is there anything you can tell us about that? How you work or how you've used those to leverage and improve your system?

TRACY EMBRETT: Yes, we work with our colleagues in other jurisdictions on a regular basis. Within Nova Scotia, we have a very close working relationship with Mi'kmaw Family & Children Services as a delegated agency of the minister. We also work with other jurisdictions across Canada. We meet monthly with the directors of child welfare, and each province or jurisdiction has a member on that committee - two meetings a year there in person.

We've recently been in conversation - formally and informally - with the Atlantic Provinces. We are all facing similar challenges right across the country. All jurisdictions are facing the challenges about recruitment for social workers, like a lot of professions and industries, and increasing complexity for children in care. We absolutely share on a regular basis and share resources. We share what's working well in each of the jurisdictions.

We are the only jurisdiction in Canada right now with the Mockingbird model - lots of interest there. We've given presentations to other directors of child welfare across the country. We have established a new framework of practice. That was shared, and we consulted with other jurisdictions, as well as over 500 individuals and organizations in Nova Scotia as we developed that framework. So yes, lots of consultation from experts on leading practice.

TOM TAGGART: Thanks, I appreciate that very much. In that sense, what work do you take to engage and involve the foster children themselves - in making and processing new - moving forward with this? Can you speak to that a little bit?

TRACY EMBRETT: Further to MLA Ince's question about having people involved, this gives me an opportunity to share as well that we did have a youth focus group - we have a youth focus group - who we have leaned into, supported setting up, and have

leaned into on all the work related to foster care redesign. We also work regularly with a group called the Let's Care Collective. Both of these groups are current or previous children who have - were in care or care experienced. They have helped inform a lot of our work, and the Let's Care Collective - actually, their input and feedback, experiences, and suggestions are now being shared with a number of different government departments. The meetings with that team, that group is on a regular basis - very valuable input that is being shared widely across leaders within various departments.

We also have, with the new framework of practice, we have also committed to a new, updated policy manual for the delivery of services in child and family well-being that will be public facing. That is near completion, and we are now working on procedures to accompany those as well to make sure that we meet our legislative requirements within our new policy and are very pleased that it has not been a top-down piece of work at all. It has taken quite a bit of time, but it has been a full engagement of service delivery, social workers, supervisors, as well as program leads to compile and redesign this work.

THE CHAIR: MLA Taggart. We have six minutes . . . (interruption). Well, five and a half now.

TOM TAGGART: I've never had that much time to talk before. (Laughter) Especially when we were talking about - I've got to find the initials here now - the TEAs, the number was up and it's down. A significant portion of this report - the most recent portion of it mostly - took place throughout COVID. You may have already answered this, but we talked at one point about - I think it was 233 or something like that - children in temporary emergency arrangements, I think is the right wording. Now it's down to 33. Was the elevation in those numbers really COVID? Am I right about that? I know you partly answered that, but on each side of that, would those numbers have been noticeably lower?

TRACY EMBRETT: COVID was a factor but wasn't the reason why the numbers were high. Numbers of foster caregivers who were able to accept children - not having the constellations and supports up, and not being able to find the placements that could meet the needs of all the children. It's difficult to answer that question, but it certainly wasn't attributed only to COVID. It was a factor.

TOM TAGGART: Your comment about over-65 - it's not great, right? Do we have a solution for that? I understand everybody else has complexities of life today and the challenges, and certainly I'm sure folks after their own children have left home - any suggestions or solutions? Do you know what I mean?

That's the challenge. I'm sure it's a challenge that you've thought about. Are there comments you'd like to make on that?

TRACY EMBRETT: Are you interested in foster caring? (Laughter)

[10:45 a.m.]

TOM TAGGART: I don't plan on retiring. You'd better ask my wife.

TRACY EMBRETT: We're grateful for all the caregivers, who are amazing with children. There's something special about someone with a lot of experience caring for their children and families. As we're leading up to the foster AGM - and there will be years of service - it's quite humbling to attend those, because a lot of these foster caregivers have been loving children for 40 years or more.

The increase in funding and additional supports, we hope, will entice and incent younger folks to foster because there is adequate funding for child care activities and lots of support and respite. Most families now - lots of families now have more than one adult working, so additional supports would be quite helpful.

We're keeping on recruiting and doing the best we can.

TOM TAGGART: I'm going to wrap up by again thanking you folks and your staff and those foster home families very much for all the work they do for children. We all know they really need our support. Undoubtedly there are challenges and things that need to be improved, but I just really think it's important that you folks know how much that work is appreciated.

THE CHAIR: We're wrapping up the questioning a little early by 30 seconds. I would like to ask any of the witnesses if they have closing statements. Deputy Minister Beaton.

CRAIG BEATON: I just want to thank the committee for the opportunity to be here today. I've had the opportunity to present before the committee a number of times. Typically I have more to say, but early in my tenure here with DCS, so I appreciate your patience and I want to thank both Ms. Embrett and Ms. Bent James. As you can see, they're subject-matter experts who know the ins and outs of the department very well, as well as the community. They work tirelessly in that endeavour.

I do also want to thank the staff at DCS. I've had, in a few short days, the opportunity to meet with a number of staff both in person but also virtually. It's really impressive to see the commitment and the dedication, as well as the enthusiasm about trying to do things for the most vulnerable population in Nova Scotia.

I would just also finally say that I want to thank the Auditor General and her team for their report.

THE CHAIR: MLA Leblanc.

SUSAN LEBLANC: I just wanted to see if we could - this is not a motion, but just a reminder of all of the questions that were asked. I want to make sure the clerk follows up. I also wanted to make a motion. Is this an appropriate time?

THE CHAIR: I've just spoken with the clerk, and she has written down all of the information that the committee has asked for and will deal with that through emails.

We will make a motion after the witnesses leave. You are welcome to leave. We will take a two-minute recess. Thank you for coming.

[10:49 a.m. The committee recessed.]

[10:52 a.m. The committee reconvened.]

THE CHAIR: Order. We are now back from recess. We will move to committee business. We will start with correspondence and then move on. We've all received a - sorry, can't find it here. Yes, I can . . . (interruption) - the email from Byron Rafuse, deputy minister. Is there any conversation about that? MLA Leblanc.

SUSAN LEBLANC: I'll just say that I think that for people experiencing domestic violence or intimate partner violence, a 7.3-month wait for housing - emergency housing - is too long.

THE CHAIR: Any other discussion? No?

We will now recognize MLA Leblanc. She had said earlier that she would like to make a motion.

SUSAN LEBLANC: This motion was circulated, but I do have a slight amendment - not an amendment, but more of a preamble, I guess:

Whereas the Auditor General's report was alarming and left us with significant concerns about the well-being and safety of children in the care of the minister; and

Given that there is a direct relationship between the Child and Youth Advocate Office and this topic, and we were unable to get answers about that topic today;

I move that this committee hold a second meeting on this topic in six months' time and the Department of Community Services be called back as a witness to update the committee on its progress in responding to this report.

That's my motion. I just want to say that acknowledging that the Auditor General did tell us that there would be a follow-up and possibly sooner than the usual two-year follow-up, I still think a meeting within six months' time to check on this and where the department is with the recommendations and get more information about the Child and Youth Advocate Office at that time is highly appropriate.

THE CHAIR: I will now open the floor for discussion. MLA Clark.

BRAEDON CLARK: Just to say briefly that I agree with the motion put forward by MLA Leblanc. I think we heard today that, obviously, the need for a Commissioner for Children and Youth is critical. I think the deputy minister himself acknowledged that would be a big step forward. I know we're getting close to the end of our term, getting close to the Summer recess, I guess I would say, for Public Accounts Committee, so topics will need to be filled going forward when we return in the Fall. I think this would certainly be a relevant and important one, so I support the motion.

THE CHAIR: MLA Young.

NOLAN YOUNG: Just to MLA Clark's point, this is incredibly important. This is incredibly important to us. It's incredibly important to the committee as a whole, to Nova Scotians, to the Auditor General.

With that said, as all topics come across, and the Auditor General can do a follow-up report sooner than usual, but talking about topic selection is a great time to bring this forward for topic selection at our next selection date. I would be open to bringing this back for our topic-selection period through our normal process.

THE CHAIR: MLA Leblanc.

SUSAN LEBLANC: I kind of anticipated that answer from the Conservatives. I feel like maybe when we have our conversation about the way we select topics, this should be part of the conversation. What I mean by that is, I think sometimes if there is an urgency to a topic, like this one, we need to look at placing it on the roster of meetings outside of the regular three-two-one or three-two-two or whatever we do now in terms of partisan topics.

This is a non-partisan committee, and so the idea that this would go into regular topic selection essentially means that if the Conservatives don't move it as a topic, the Opposition members . . . (interruption). I don't know why you're making that face. You'll have a chance to talk in a second.

If the Conservatives don't move it as a topic, then the Opposition has to, and that means we have fewer opportunities to move other topics.

I'm okay with deferring this, but I do think that we should put it on the agenda to talk about topics when we talk about topic selection. It seems like an unfair process.

NOLAN YOUNG: I will be brief. I'm not looking to turn this into a partisan topic. This is stuff that we genuinely care about. I'm not saying the Conservatives - even though we're Progressive Conservatives - I'm really not turning this into a partisan thing. Our normal process is the topic selection. I don't even think it's three-two-one or any of that. It was submit topics. I really urge us to put this through the topic-selection process as normal.

I was brief.

THE CHAIR: MLA Lachance.

LISA LACHANCE: I'd like to speak in support of the motion and the ability to respond to timely issues. I think we've all agreed that we want the best for young people. I think we can all agree that we need to see changes urgently. I think this is particularly - when we're talking about children, the time is passing. The years are passing. It's really important that we plan this follow-up meeting now. It's also particularly on the legislative promise and the mandate promise around a child and youth commissioner that also - it was unfortunate that the department came unprepared to speak to.

THE CHAIR: I'm going to call the question. All those in favour?

Oh, sorry. MLA Taggart.

TOM TAGGART: I put my hand up to ask: When's the next topic-selection meeting? Secondly, a couple of other things. There are very few of these topics that we don't talk about that are not urgent. I understand - don't get me wrong. This is an urgent topic. But we have a process, and I think we should stick to it.

The question about the child advocate - that wasn't what the committee is here for. We're here to talk about the health and safety and well-being of children placed in temporary - I don't even think that was in the Auditor General's report, so why is that - anyway.

I have a question. When is the next topic-setting agenda?

THE CHAIR: There is no date yet for the next topic-setting agenda.

SUSAN LEBLANC: Can we just move to the question? We're going to run out of time. Please.

THE CHAIR: I'm going to call the question.

All those in favour? Contrary minded? Thank you.

The motion is defeated.

Our next meeting will be May 22, 2024 - Department of Health and Wellness, Department of Public Works, and Build Nova Scotia re Health Infrastructure Projects.

We now call this meeting adjourned.

[The committee adjourned at 11:00 a.m.]