



House of Assembly  
*Nova Scotia*

**HALIFAX, TUESDAY, APRIL 11, 2023**

**COMMITTEE OF THE WHOLE ON SUPPLY**

**3:25 P.M.**

CHAIR  
Kent Smith

THE CHAIR: Order, please. The Committee of the Whole on Supply will come to order.

The honourable Government House Leader.

HON. KIM MASLAND: Thank you, Chair. Would you please call the Estimates for the Minister of the Department of Community Services and the Department of L'nú Affairs, Resolution Nos. E4 and E30.

THE CHAIR: Thank you. I will say that there are 15 minutes remaining of NDP questioning.

The honourable member for Dartmouth South.

CLAUDIA CHENDER: Thank you, Chair. I am just going to finish briefly with the line of questions from the last day. Last week, I asked the minister about the DoubleTree Hotel in Dartmouth. This is a 200-plus room hotel with no kitchen facilities in any of the units. There are huge questions from the community and, I would say, from the greater community of folks working with the unhoused, around what the plans are for this building.

Our understanding - the rumour - is that it will be a continuation of emergency shelter services, but of course we have huge questions around that. That's a lot of people. That's a lack of kitchen facilities. If it's supported, what kind of support will it be? How will the neighbourhood be involved in these conversations? What's the budget?

I am aware of the division of the homelessness portfolio into the Department of Community Services, and the housing portfolio into the Department of Municipal Affairs and Housing - which I will just take the opportunity to say I think it's really weird. We all understand that housing exists on a continuum, and I think it is unfortunate that's not reflected in our government structures.

[3:30 p.m.]

Nonetheless, last week the minister said, we'll have more to share as soon as next week. Now it's next week, so I am going to ask again: Can the minister share anything about this project? There are lots of rumours. There is a huge amount of curiosity. Those rumours are because there is no information. So what we hear on the news is that the Province is going to strengthen its relationship with the hotel owner. Quite frankly, I have no idea what that means. I think it means the Province is going to lease the hotel. If that's what it means, maybe the minister could clarify.

Genuinely, we just want to understand what's going on - particularly for my office - so that we can help the community to understand, and we can make sure that we can support it in whatever way is possible.

THE CHAIR: The honourable Minister of Community Services.

HON. KARLA MACFARLANE: I thank the member for the question. I know this is very important to the member as it directly affects her constituency and her constituents, as well as neighbouring constituencies. What I want to reassure the member about is that this is a colossal initiative that we are taking on for rumours to be out there because there is no clarity of what is going on. I accept that somewhat, but our messaging and narrative has always been when we fully have everything put together, we will allow everyone to know at the same time. We haven't been sharing little bits here or there.

We remain very, very committed to the individuals who are there now and staying there, as well as committed to those partners we are working with to ensure that we strike a balance between understanding and having all the proper details in place and logistics. We hope we get it right. That is always our goal: to make sure that the individuals that we are serving will have everything in place.

As the member has mentioned about kitchen facilities - that would be one thing that we are trying to work out. It's not like it's the first time we haven't been able to work something like that out. There are a lot of different partnerships to have discussions with.

We are always very conscientious about spending taxpayers' money. We want to make sure that we are hitting the right balance with all the partners and organizations that we are in discussions with.

It is really important to ensure that no one who is living there at the moment will be displaced. We are into this week, and I assure the member that there will be more information to share this week. I am sorry that it is not at this point in time, but I am committed to making sure that everyone who is keenly interested in this initiative will be fully aware by the end of the week.

THE CHAIR: The honourable member for Dartmouth North.

SUSAN LEBLANC: I just have two questions to ask the minister today, unlike usual. The first one is a follow-up to this question, because the DoubleTree Hotel in Dartmouth actually - who knows who's riding it's in. It's in this netherland of Dartmouth North and Dartmouth South. Regardless, for sure there are people from Dartmouth North who live there now.

One of the things that we have heard about this situation is that there are number of workers at the hotel who have been given their leave and one of the issues is that their collective agreement basically says they have seniority for ten months but the contract is 11 months, so the contract being worked out with the province has some kind of - basically, the end result is that anyone who loses their job won't have the ability to get their job back if they rehire workers.

This is a serious issue. My understanding is that there are somewhere between 80 and 100 people who are going to lose work if this deal goes through. I am seeing the minister frown. Basically, if this deal has not been worked out properly or fully yet, then I want to bring this to the minister's attention. Because if there is negotiation to do, perhaps it would be important to negotiate some severance for those people who are going to lose their jobs as of whenever the province takes over the building.

My question to the minister is: Had she heard about this issue of the workers who work at the hotel losing work, and is she willing to negotiate some kind of severance for them in the event that DCS is going to be leasing this building?

KARLA MACFARLANE: Without disclosing too much personal information about the employees, there will be more information on that question later this week when everything will be announced to the public. We do have a few other things, as I mentioned earlier, that we have to discuss. As the member would probably know, the employees at the hotel are employed by the hotel. We have been very much so involved in discussions to ensure that there will be direction for them for employment elsewhere and we know that the vast majority of them will be employed.

If there are those who may not be, again, I can't reveal any stats on that, but I can assure the member that discussions are happening, because we would not want that to happen. We've also brought in our Minister of Labour, Skills and Immigration just in case there was anything that her department would be able to assist with, if need be. Again, just to the member, we certainly have explored and looked at those issues but they really are employed and the responsibility of the employer of the hotel. I hope that helps.

SUSAN LEBLANC: Yes, that does help. I look forward to hearing the fallout from those discussions.

On a totally different topic, the minister repeatedly has said in this House that she will do whatever she can to get people attached to income assistance when they need it. In Question Period we have talked about income assistance and her answer has often been, Whoever needs income assistance will get income assistance. That is notwithstanding the need for raising the rates and all of that stuff.

I have a constituent - and this is not the first time this has happened - but this man has found himself on workers' compensation, and because of a variety of circumstances, the package that he bought - he's a subcontractor in business for himself as a construction worker - when he began working in Nova Scotia, he didn't have enough money to buy a better workers' compensation package, which means that when he actually got injured on the job, he had the lowest amount of insurance that was legal. So he now finds himself with a monthly income of, I'm going to say, in the \$500 to \$600 range. It is extremely low. I can't remember exactly how much it is a week. No one can survive on \$500 to \$600.

This person has found himself cohabitating - sorry. Maybe that's the wrong - the whole point of this question is about this and about cohabitation. He has found himself needing to move in with his ex-partner. They are in a two-bedroom apartment. They do not have a conjugal relationship, for lack of a better description. They are not partners anymore. They have a child together - a grown-up child, and they were together a long time ago, but because they have a relationship around the child, the ex-partner has said, Yes, come and live with me. He would literally be on the street, because there is nowhere to live for \$500 to \$600.

He cannot get income assistance because - my understanding is the definition of the policy is that even if you swear an affidavit that you are not in a relationship with somebody, if you have a child with them then you are considered as part of a couple. I cannot believe that in this day and age and with all of the things that have happened, with the cost of living, and with COVID-19, and people's living arrangements, the fact is that there is nowhere to live in Nova Scotia right now. In Dartmouth North the vacancy rate is less than 1 per cent - it's about 0.6 per cent. How is it possible that we cannot figure out for this guy to get before someone and swear that he is not in a relationship with this person and get him on income assistance?

He's on \$500 to \$600 and it also means he has drug coverage for any injury for what he is on workers' compensation for, but otherwise he doesn't have any access to Pharmacare. I'm asking the minister: Will the minister take a look at this exact case, but also take a look at this policy at this point, because this policy is outdated. I understand that there are people who try to cheat the system. I get it, but there are also people who are living on \$500 or trying to live on \$500 who cannot make it, and I would like for this person to be able to access income assistance.

KARLA MACFARLANE: I thank the member for her question and for representing her constituent the best way she knows how. What I would suggest and recommend is because we can't get into personals or disclose or name people in this Chamber, it is extremely important for me to understand the situation of her constituent. Although they are on workers' compensation, there could be a discussion we could have collectively together that I may be able to help the member go back and help her constituent with information and resources that I am aware of. I am extremely happy and committed to taking this conversation offline and helping the member.

I also want to let the member know that we are constantly, in our department, looking at different policies and making changes where we can to benefit our clients and we will continue having those discussions and certainly take note of her comments.

Again, I highly recommend that we have a discussion with myself or my deputy and see if we can help her constituent somehow to move forward because we always have the best interests of people. Whether they are our clients or not, we may know of a way to navigate the individual's future.

THE CHAIR: The honourable member for Cape Breton Centre-Whitney Pier.

KENDRA COOMBES: I am going to start with some homelessness and food insecurity questions for the minister. First, how are we addressing food insecurity at the source, not just giving money to food banks that are overwhelmed and over capacity? Does this department have a guiding strategy, and will they table it?

KARLA MACFARLANE: This government has taken food security very seriously, especially given the challenging and critical times right now that people are facing with much adversity around just being financially stable. We certainly know that there are forces out of our control globally that have impacted us and certainly have hurt the most vulnerable in our province, in Canada, and North America.

What I would like to allow the member to understand from this perspective over here is that we know that food insecurity is very complex and that it is not just coming from the Department of Community Services. It's not like we are responsible for food insecurity. It is a government responsibility of all levels.

[3:45 p.m.]

More importantly, within our government, I work with the Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development on food security. I work with the Minister of Agriculture on food security. I work with the Minister of Health and Wellness on food security. I work with the Minister of Communities, Culture, Tourism and Heritage on food security. I work with the Minister of Seniors and Long-term Care. We all come together, and we all have pots of funding that we ensure that we can help all the food banks across here.

Look, we realize that much more needs to be done and we don't have what we call a specific strategy, but we are all doing the very best that we can. What I can say is that we know that the Department of Agriculture is reviewing and working on a food and beverage strategy, and looking to see how we can come together and make this work.

I will let the member know that at Community Services we have decided that we have already invested in a collaborative food network pilot which is happening actually in Preston and Eskasoni - East Preston, actually - and the collaborative food network is propelled basically to create more sustainable wraparound services and to be able to leverage and ensure that all organizations within the community, along with government assets, can work together to address the intersection of food with physical and mental well-being, poverty, social inclusion, and to ensure that individuals are healthy enough and well enough that we can assist in their skill sets to hopefully try to find employment.

We will continue to be culturally responsive as well when we speak of food security, and we want culturally responsive food security services available for Nova Scotians and individuals and families with children. Just to give an idea of some of the funding, through the Department of Health and Wellness they provide an annual grant of \$750,000 to support health-promoting schools as well as an annual grant of \$1.7 million for the School Healthy Eating Program. We could go on with the number of investments. We could certainly table those investments or get to the member all those investments that we have made. There certainly have been major increases - millions and millions of dollars more prior to the last government that was in government.

KENDRA COOMBES: I am seeing that there seems to be no strategy. It seems like it is still the same thing under the Liberal government and last year seems to be the same approach - and that is piecemeal, food banks, teachers. That reliance - and I know the minister well, and I know the minister is sincere in her wanting to help, but we need a food strategy here in Nova Scotia. We have people who are starving. We have food banks that are overwhelmed, over capacity. They can't keep doing the work. Government does have a responsibility and government does have a role to play, and that is providing people with enough money so that they can go to the grocery store and they can buy the food that they need. I do hope that we are going to see something very soon because we can't keep relying on outside sources.

I want to talk about homelessness. My first question is: What is the Department of Community Services' plan for homelessness? Things are getting worse. There is a lack of housing stock, rent supplements only work when there are places to rent, and there are barely any vacancies left and anything that is there is well overpriced. We have people who are living in tents, in parks, in the woods. We have people living in their cars. The rural areas - they are definitely in the woods. They are couch-surfing. I've said this before: This is couch-surfing.

Homelessness and the lack of housing is actually detrimental to our health care system. We have families - along with the same minister's department - who are homeless. We have families who are homeless, and they are scared to come forward - terrified - because if they do there is the potential for DCS, for child welfare to come in and they might lose their children. We have all of these problems with regard to our homeless population. We have seniors who are on the streets. We have families. We have people who are single. Rent supplements only work when there are places to rent and there is nowhere to rent that is affordable. I ask the minister: Do we have a homelessness strategy here in Nova Scotia?

KARLA MACFARLANE: I just want to clarify when the member did ask her question and indicated that it sounded like there was no food strategy, but I want to reaffirm that I indicated that the Department of Agriculture is actually providing and working on a strategy - a food and beverage strategy.

Many departments - I can speak for my department, for sure. We are very involved in that network and ensuring we are there at the table to contribute any way that we can. We know that we have a lot to offer from knowing and witnessing what we see, especially with knowing that we provide close to 200 different organizations with funding, plus knowing what is happening in our own communities and hearing what's in our own communities. I just want to, again, reassure the member that we are on it. There have been major investments and we will continue making those investments. Is it perfect? Absolutely not, but we are definitely committed.

Moving on to the member's current question, homelessness hasn't just been around since this government formed, and I know everyone in this Chamber realizes that homelessness has been around for a long, long time. I sat in Opposition for eight years and we talked about homelessness and whether or not there was going to be any type of - what were they going to do? What was the Liberal government going to do about the homeless situation? At the time I had a young gentleman in his 20s - I took him in. We provided temporary shelter for that individual for about two months before we were able to find them a permanent housing solution, and that was back in 2013, I think, or 2014.

Again, this government has invested \$8.8 million more, making the total investment for supportive housing - it's a first in Canada, the models that we are using, and we should be very, very proud - our total investment is \$26 million. Every year we have been making

a sincere financial contribution that will continue to ensure that we can find individuals temporary shelter, but our main goal is always to find permanent housing.

I know it's a struggle. We all know there is a housing crisis. We all wish we had a magic wand and we could change the situation. Each and every one in this Chamber would love to be able to do that. We are working as fast as we can and I want to say that addressing homelessness - we realize the potential that it has to reduce the pressures on our health care system. We know that. And hospital beds and emergency rooms and, in particular, just on our justice system alone. We are very committed.

Again in this year's budget - an increase of \$8.2 million. The funding will be used as well for new and continued supportive housing initiatives throughout this whole province, from Yarmouth right to Cape North. We want to continue working with those organizations and service providers. I thank those who are working in the Department of Community Services who are committed daily to having those conversations with our service providers. You know, we have a lot of service providers and I don't know where we would be without them, and without those individuals who have a huge, huge heart.

Many Nova Scotians, we know the challenges that they have. Their personal challenges sometimes make it difficult for them to find housing that they feel comfortable in and that they can stay there. Often these individuals have very complex needs, but the member is correct. We do see a number of individuals who are hard-working Nova Scotians with children, and they can't afford their rent and they may not be able to afford their mortgage. That is when we have to step in and try to help them and say, Okay, would you fit under this program? Maybe it's a rental supplement of some sort, or maybe it's making sure that we can supply them with - work with our shelter diversion program.

Anyone knows we do suggest to reach out anytime because we want to be able to have those thoughtful conversations and understand the needs.

It worries me when the member talks about families being scared. I would hope they would want to come to us so we can find them a place. We don't want people sleeping in their cars. We want people to be able to be in a secure environment, feeling a sense of belonging, and knowing that they can provide for their family. They need a lift. We are the department that can give them a lift and help them through. We have professionals, we have people who are highly skilled and professional and deal with these situations day in and day out, and they are very caring and are dedicated to helping individuals.

Just before I finish on this, though, I did want to mention that in this past year alone 61 per cent of supportive housing units are new within the last year. We have 521 supportive housing units. That's pretty incredible for our government to have achieved that in the last year. I don't know any other government that has ever been able to do that. It's because of the great workers we have and being innovative and some working 24/7.



[4:00 p.m.]

I know the member would know that we just had our supportive housing in The Overlook in Dartmouth, which is an incredible transformation of a hotel property that has just been made into permanent, supportive housing for 60 individuals. Funding was just announced as well for a new property in Cape Breton, which the member would be happy to know about, where it will support six men experiencing chronic homelessness.

Again, every day we are looking at different organizations and partnerships with people and we will keep doing that. I hope that answers some of the questions.

KENDRA COOMBES: No, not really, because I am looking for a plan - a full, detailed plan of how we get a handle on this situation. I am going to ask the minister this: Has the minister talked with her colleague at Municipal Affairs and Housing about the need that they are seeing in their department, the need for more public housing and more deeply affordable housing? When I say deeply affordable, I mean under 30 per cent of your income.

KARLA MACFARLANE: As the member would know, housing really exists on quite a large spectrum and we are aware of all those different levels from homelessness to supportive, making sure individuals have supportive housing, some in need of help financially to pay their rent, some who may need permanent housing, and some who prefer to have temporary shelter. Our services are there for anyone and we are willing to help anyone, but they are voluntary. We can't make someone come to us.

It is very important that I have these conversations every other day with my fellow ministers with regard to the situation of homelessness and the housing crisis. Those are conversations that are on our table all the time. They are not going away anytime soon. We know that and that is why we continue to have these discussions and look at it from a holistic view, trying to see where we can reach deeply so that we can be preventive and have that early intervention in ensuring that we don't have more people who are going to have to depend on resources that the government has there. Everyone wants to live a dignified life. Everyone wants to be able to support themselves and be independent.

I know that the roles at DCS with regard to homelessness really intersect with a lot of the policies and the role and the responsibility of the Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing. Of course, we are constantly talking and collaborating and thinking outside the box, and having those thoughtful discussions and really working with all municipalities across the province that are experiencing an increase in homelessness in their communities. We know it's there.

I think that we are moving as fast as we can. We will continue to be committed. I know that the member would know that recent announcements have just been made here

in HRM. We will keep doing our very best. I promised the individual that and we are having the conversations every other day.

KENDRA COOMBES: I am going to move on to child welfare. Last year at Estimates, the minister indicated to me that they weren't familiar with the contract of \$21 million to Arden Professional Client Care to provide places of safety and temporary emergency accommodations, also known as TEA. I am wondering if the minister is now familiar as she is now no longer brand new to her role.

We are concerned with the lack of regulation of these private, for-profit centres, as well as the lack of training staff working with vulnerable children have. Can the minister explain this department practice and the decision to invest in these private companies instead of the public sector?

KARLA MACFARLANE: First of all, I think the member has mischaracterized from last year with regard to not being familiar with temporary arrangements. I am very familiar. Yes, I am more knowledgeable this year, as anyone would be in their job to become more knowledgeable, but I was definitely familiar last year. I remember the briefings and I remember the stories around those briefings and having much concern around the children going into temporary care.

No one likes to see children going into temporary care, but it does happen once in a while. Sometimes it is to ensure the safety and protection of the child. Always the child is at our forefront. That is all - not all, I should say - but that is always my main concern, the child. What is best for the child?

The member is correct that some of these organizations that partner with us are private. Not all, but some of them are private. Again, it mostly happens when we don't have a foster home in place that meets the criteria and the needs of the child. These temporary care placements really serve their purpose. Again, are they perfect? No, absolutely not, but it is a solution to an issue that has come up very quickly in most cases where we can't find a foster care home that is willing to provide a home for them at the moment.

What I would say is that as the member knows, we have invested \$34 million over five years in our Mockingbird redesign of our foster care system that is called the Mockingbird Family. We know, when we look at the over 650 foster caregivers in this province and we have close to maybe anywhere between 800 to 1,000 children in care at a time, we need more foster caregivers. There is no doubt about it. We have been out there really promoting that. With our new foster care design, I believe that we are going to achieve that.

We have just recently seen an increase in our numbers for foster caregivers and we are really proud of that. Right now, I think it has gone up to - we've just had 33 more

families. I suggest to anyone who is in the Chamber right now hopefully hearing my plea, please share. Please share. We need more foster caregivers. The system that we are going to be putting in place - as many would know, we currently have a pilot in Preston as well as in Cape Breton and it is going extremely well.

[4:15 p.m.]

We know that this redesign will definitely result in more supports, not just for the children but for the foster caregivers. It will also include recruitment of emergency receiving foster homes for children who are brought into care. Sixty-six per cent of these children out of the 870 are cared for by foster caregivers and my goal and the department's goal is to have at least 1,000. That will reduce having to have these temporary placements that the member has brought forward. Currently, right now, we have started to move all foster homes to - we will be this Fall - beginning to move all foster homes to constellations, and applying what we have learned from the two that are in the pilot program right now.

I know that it is a very exciting time for foster caregivers with these new changes. It's not just going to benefit the children but the foster caregivers as well. I am happy to share more on the Mockingbird design. There are a lot of details around it, but it is all really positive and we are just excited that we have more foster families joining our team at this point in time.

THE CHAIR: Order, please. The hour of NDP questioning has elapsed. We will return to the Liberal caucus.

The honourable member for Hammonds Plains-Lucasville.

HON. BEN JESSOME: I hope everyone had a great weekend. I hope nobody ate as much chocolate as I did. I'm scared for the day when I actually have kids in the house to eat their chocolate. It's coming sooner rather than later.

I stopped on a line of questioning right before the weekend, a line of questioning with respect to arms-length organizations and funding, but I think I will stick to children in the care of the minister for a little bit while we are on the same subject matter at this point. Through the Chair, I would like to ask the minister how many children are under her roof, so to speak, as a start.

THE CHAIR: The honourable Minister of Community Services.

KARLA MACFARLANE: Currently, there are 870 children in the care of the minister.

BEN JESSOME: How much money does the department budget to look after those children?

THE CHAIR: I would ask the honourable member for Hammonds Plains-Lucasville to restate the question.

BEN JESSOME: To clarify, how much is the departmental budget to look after the children that are within the minister's care - budgeted for places of safety? If that helps.

KARLA MACFARLANE: What I would say is first of all, in this current budget, you would see that there would be \$11.8 million around the maintenance of children. But I want the member to understand that this would be an uncapped situation. We can't project out if we are going to have 100 and some children who need to be put into temporary placements or if we are going to have two. Obviously, we would like to have none, but we will always ensure that there is going to be money there for anyone who would need that service.

For the overall budget - that would include foster parent resources, foster care redesign and everything - it is a little over \$104 million. Included in that total would be the \$11 million that I speak about for temporary placement. Again, the maintenance of children would be approximately \$83 million. Then, as mentioned, we increased the foster care redesign project. It is \$34 million over five years. This year in the budget you would see \$8.5 million going toward it. Then the foster parent resources would be \$960,000.

I would say that because our government is extremely focused on prevention and early intervention, you would see that we actually have an increase of \$7.8 million into programs to ensure that we are working with families - Families Plus and early intervention - and there are a number of different programs that we provide throughout communities here in Nova Scotia to ensure that families stay united. It is always our goal to reunite families, and I believe that with these investments we are helping families before things percolate into what some would consider a disaster for them. We want to get in there early and I think we are doing a good job at that in increasing investments at those early stages.

I know that when I first started, one of the first things that I had mentioned to my deputy and team was that I am very much focused on prevention and early intervention. I think that when we look at the investments alone, an increase this year at \$7.8 million, we have Parenting Journey, which is a goal-based home visitation program so that we are making sure that professionals are getting into the home with families and that they help them build their skills to be the best parents that they can. We ultimately know that they love their children dearly, but they may need a little bit of assistance in parenting skills.

I was lucky that I had family close by, but a lot of people don't have the same networks. Again, Families Plus, which is ensuring that registered social workers provide intensive home-based supports for a period of up to nine months. This is really exciting news because we have actually just created four more sites because we know that they work so well.

Strengthening Fathers - that was another thing. As soon as I given the privilege to be in this role, I said, We are not investing enough into our young boys and men. We have to do better. We have to do better and help them. This is an opportunity to support fathers who have used family violence as a way of trying to control and not wanting to, but due to their own trauma and history and family background. This program supports safety and well-being for these fathers and for their children and their partners and then Fatherhood Matters and then we have family resource programs and community family peer support. Cultural connections, Youth Outreach, and the list goes on and on. These programs - I mean, I could get into specifics about them. I think it is really important for the member to know that in total of all these programs in the province, there are 82 different organizations that are providing these services at a total funding of \$19.9 million, but more importantly, out of those numbers we are servicing between 35,000 and 40,000 children, youth, and families. We have 82 service providers, but the programs would be 138 in total.

Again, I am very proud that we were able to see additional financial investments in this budget of \$7.8 million to enhance and expand these programs to new sites and areas across this province. I hope that helps answer some of the questions the member had.

BEN JESSOME: I assume that we started out with a number of 870 children in the minister's care. She just referenced thousands. I am assuming that the number of broader - for what reason? Can I ask the minister to clarify? When I first stood up, I asked how many are in the minister's care and she referenced 870 children in care. She just referenced tens of thousands being funded by DCS's budget in her last final statement. I would just ask the minister to clarify what she meant.

KARLA MACFARLANE: Yes, I will certainly clarify that. Sorry, I was at the end commenting on all the wonderful early intervention and prevention programs that we have that are benefiting between 35,000 and 40,000 children, families, and parents who are not in our care. That is the whole purpose of making sure that we are getting to them before they have to come into care. Right now, I think I stated that I have 873 individuals in my care.

BEN JESSOME: Thank you for the minister's patience in that clarification. What is the average length of stay for children in places of safety?

KARLA MACFARLANE: We would probably see the average stay would be sometimes up to a year. Our goal is always to make sure that stay is as short as possible, but the real goal, as mentioned earlier, is to make sure that those investments are going into early intervention and prevention programs so that we never have to see children come into temporary care placements.

Again, we are faced - and I guess I will be repeating myself here - the challenge is to get foster caregivers and to ensure that there are enough families out there to care for some of these children and youth with extreme, complex needs. As I said earlier, many

times some of these children and youth have very challenging lives, many of them. They have some really - through no fault of their own - complex needs that require a lot of attention and patience and love and care, of course. We want to ensure that they have a place where they will be safe - safe for themselves and, in some cases, safe for their families too.

[4:30 p.m.]

We must ensure that when they do come into care that there is stability and that each of them feels that they are being cared for and supported as needed. Again, the complexities of some of these children are really hard. Without getting into specifics, I just can't explain how difficult some of these situations are 24/7. At the end of the day, we need more foster caregivers and I will continue to be an advocate out there and try to convince people to be a foster care parent.

I was going to be a foster care parent 20-some years ago and at the time, we went through the process and it was great, although we had a bed and breakfast. You know, that's what I love about this department. They put the child first and at the time my husband and I had a bed and breakfast where there would be people in and out all the time and that wasn't considered safe for the child, and you know what? Rightly so.

We want to ensure that the children - their needs are being met. We know that we are committed to fully redesigning the foster care system. That is a commitment of mine and I want to ensure that I can increase the supports for caregivers as well, on all fronts. Yes, that would include financially as well as ensuring that they have a network of support of like-minded people. I think that what the Mockingbird model really provides is a good, stable network of individuals who support one another. I think that answers. I am willing to take the member's next question.

BEN JESSOME: With respect to oversight for these organizations and the job that they are doing with respect to places of safety for children who are temporarily in the minister's care, I am wondering if the minister could provide the House with some information with respect to how the government ensures things are in order, that the organizations are doing what they are chartered to do, and that there are obviously checks and balances to ensure not only that the children are getting what they need and the organizations are getting what they need, but to make sure that taxpayers' dollars are being spent efficiently. I am just looking for some clarification on the oversight mechanisms that the department would have in place with respect to these arrangements with the 82 organizations that she referenced.

KARLA MACFARLANE: To the member, I want to let them know that at any of these temporary care placements, for each individual there are always two people ensuring that all needs are being met, so that they have the support of one another when they are working. Often these individuals who are in these temporary care placements have very

high, complex needs. All of those who are in these placements would have two staff on at all times, 24/7.

We certainly do our due diligence with any of the providers. Of course, we would have a service-level agreement in place with the providers. That is not something that we take lightly. We make sure that we have dotted all of our i's and crossed our t's and that there have been a number of sets of eyes on these service-level agreements. We want to make sure that any staff who would have any involvement would be aware. Then it goes directly to the deputy minister and they would go over it with a fine-tooth comb - I can't even think here now, thank you - and make sure that everything is in place.

I think that we have to ensure, too, that all other options would be explored and that we have a team of staff that would meet weekly with the service provider, making sure that they have everything they need to do their job as well. We want to be in contact, have updates weekly, and ensure that we are all supporting one another. It is important for us. I often say anyone can be accountable if they know that you are coming. We do surprise visits, unnoticed. We go in and we make sure that things are running smoothly and within our service agreement with them.

BEN JESSOME: I do agree that unannounced visits and the repetition of meeting with service providers on a weekly basis certainly would lend itself to a situation where accountability is reinforced. To the minister's comments from earlier in that the budget is uncapped, it also sounds to me like there is a scenario where the service provider could potentially walk away unless they get the money that they are looking for. What I am trying to say is that if the budget is uncapped, what is stopping service providers from potentially walking away from these agreements? How do we ensure that they stay doing the job that they signed on to do?

KARLA MACFARLANE: Our service providers are under contract with us, but they are only paid for the service they provide. So if there is a case where we have to intervene, it's not like they walk away with a bunch of money or anything. That absolutely does not happen. We are always there to make sure that the individual has everything they need, but if we have to intervene, they are paid for the time that they had the child, and we then will make sure that the child is put into another arrangement and find somewhere where their needs will be met.

BEN JESSOME: Thank you for clarifying. I am wondering if the minister would table or put together a list of those 82 service providers.

KARLA MACFARLANE: I would like to ask the member what he is referring to in 82 service providers. I think earlier I mentioned that we had 82 service providers for our early intervention but those are not children who are in my care. Again, that goes back to 82 service providers across the province that provide SchoolsPlus and all of them. I can't

say - I'll have to look it up here. If you are looking for the number of providers for temporary care, I think is maybe what you are asking.

[4:45 p.m.]

BEN JESSOME: Thank you again for your patience, Minister. Yes. I will make that clarification on my notes with respect to those preventive service providers but yes, I am looking for the number and details on which organizations the department has contracts with respecting the children in care.

KARLA MACFARLANE: I would certainly be willing to follow up. I don't have that information here, but it will be no issue to get the member that information.

BEN JESSOME: Just for clarification, I am wondering why is it that the department would establish this type of a service arrangement with a private company versus keeping it under the roof of government, in-house?

KARLA MACFARLANE: To the member, my personal goal would be someday to not have any temporary emergency placements. That would always be my goal, and that is why we keep investing in the early intervention and prevention. However, you can't project out. Personally, it would make no sense. We have never had a system where we had government employees for this type of work because you don't know if you are going to have five children that come into your care or 200. That is why these temporary emergency placements are very flexible in making sure that they are available because when an unfortunate situation happens, where a child is no longer able to stay with their immediate family, there has to be an available emergency placement somewhere for them to keep them safe.

We do have these private contractors or private businesses that provide the service for us and we will continue using them while I continue to do the best I can with my department to eliminate having to have them at all.

BEN JESSOME: I am going to go back to the line of questioning that I ended with on Thursday with respect to - sorry, brain fart. Initially we were talking about the Building Vibrant Communities fund. That program had a sunset clause and it is no longer there. My question starts with: How does the department decide which organizations receive funding from the Department of Community Services if there is no application with criteria to make a case for support funding?

KARLA MACFARLANE: I appreciate the member asking this question. Actually the other day, after asking, I was thinking about it a lot and thinking, Okay, there is a lot more to this and it is somewhat hard to articulate. So I wrote down some thoughts that I want to read out to the member, and then if there is anything that the member needs for clarity - oh no, it's not that long, but I just want to make sure I try to get as much information



to him as possible because I don't think I did a good job the other day. I just want to make sure I get everything answered for you today.

As the member would know, DCS has a number of service providers across this whole province. We have a huge network. One of our divisions we have is a team that is actually responsible for working with service providers and having a real deep connection and understanding of what that community's challenges are, what their assets are, what their needs are - because even though we are a fairly small province, we know geographically that there are different needs across this province in different communities. When these needs arise at a community level, DCS works with staff and service providers, of course with other departments too, but to determine what is the best way and solution to address these challenges, or maybe address their suggestions in how to help and provide support.

Of course, the one-time investments that were, as the member may remember, made in December - we had an increase in the HARP and we had a one-time payment to those on income assistance of \$250. We had \$1,000 go to our foster caregivers. That was a result of government's conversations and desire to assist with these communities, with the pressures that they were facing with regard to inflationary costs. We continue to combine our efforts with the team that is highly skilled to go in, see what these needs are, bring that knowledge to us, and we can turn around as quickly as we can once we all sit down at the table to ensure that we not just acknowledge and address the situation but see what department is best to be put out there to be supportive in helping.

I think that if we go back and we look - I think the other day when the member was questioning me and I had brought up about - again, I always go back to these early interventions and preventions because that is truly one of the areas that I really believe in making investments, and that I am focused on, and is part of my mandate as well.

If you look at the EDGE Program - and I told the story of the young man who was part of the EDGE Program that we provided in New Glasgow - and in different areas like Kentville, Cape Breton, and a few different areas in the province - where he quickly took on his first job and embraced it, and was so excited and was so good at it that the company really equally embraced him. Then the next thing we knew, he was moving up in the company. They were putting him to school. Then he had that influence and impact on his mother who had not been employed since she was 30-some and she is now 50-some, and she decided that she, too, would go back and take the CCA course. It had a domino effect.

We look at the service providers within a region, within a community, and we say this is a good program that would really fit with you to implement and put out there. We will continue making those investments and doing what we can.

BEN JESSOME: Certainly it is our belief in the Liberal caucus that a good, early intervention would be an increase to income assistance with respect to alleviating poverty, and we know that that has been frozen for the last two years.

With respect to the minister's mandate regarding the five-year target for reducing childhood poverty, could the minister speak to any goals or targets that have been set over that five-year period, how progress is being tracked, and perhaps could she speak to, and if possible, table for the House information on the progress with respect to that part of her mandate?

[5:00 p.m.]

KARLA MACFARLANE: There has been a lot of work under way in the last 19 months. As the member would know, the budget for 2023-24 has increased by \$82.3 million, so that is a 6.8 per cent increase. That is a significant investment, but of course the investment would include over \$40 million for the Disability Support Program.

If we are looking at families and children in poverty, the budget also included an \$8.2 million increase to support homeless and supportive housing programming, and as referenced earlier by other members asking questions, this includes families experiencing housing difficulty and trying to support their families. I would say that additionally the budget includes an \$8 million increase to the Nova Scotia Child Tax Benefit, so we've been able to reduce child poverty - and \$7.8 million in new funding to expand prevention and early intervention programming that I mentioned earlier. We know that reducing child poverty and certainly making those investments into early intervention is going to help them and uplift them to not follow that sort of perpetual, systemic poverty that we see sometimes.

Financial stabilization payment for families who have lost the CCB - and I know that one of the members from the NDP spoke about this. We certainly made that change, so when families are having their children taken from them and put into temporary care, they lose that tax benefit. They lose that income. We have changed that. Normally that would halt them from receiving that income, but we have created a program because we know, as everyone knows in here, that we really work hard and strive.

Our main goal is to get families back together but when they are experiencing poverty and financial difficulties, trying to get the family reunited when they are struggling financially is almost a recipe for not working out and we don't want that. We are really proud that we created this financial stabilization payment. We will continue making those investments to help families stay reunited.

The other thing that we have done is continued on the good work of the Liberal government in creating free child care or \$10 per day child care. That was work that was started by them and we continued on with that. We are happy to say that there are more

and more placements coming available. It will take a couple of years, but we are seeing an opportunity now for families and it is really helping them - I see the member nodding - because we all know, we all struggle and the member is a lot younger than I am, but someday may find it hard to find child care. I was lucky that I had a lot of family support. A lot of people don't.

I will mention as well that I am excited to see that we also included \$3.9 million for a new program that will financially support children leaving care. So we know - and this is the age group - you care for all of them no matter what age, but it is really hard for a youth who - I always say it's like they have one foot in youth and one foot in adulthood and they are transitioning out of care, and they really don't know where they are going or what they are doing. They are the ones who are falling between the cracks that I often say no one is paying attention to.

We created a program in this budget that enables us to help those children who are transitioning out of foster care and wanting to become independent. We will help them to reach their goals, we will provide funding for them, and we know that they will have support through youth outreach workers to ensure they have a smooth transition into adulthood, that they feel supported, and they still have a place to turn to for advice and suggestions - and again, the budget increase for youth employment programming.

I spoke earlier about the EDGE Program but there are a number of different programs working with computers and digital skill sets to improve one's digital ability. There are a number of different initiatives, and we will continue making those investments. We all want to break the cycle of poverty and we know that we have to start with the common denominator that we know is our children - our future - and I am committed to helping.

BEN JESSOME: I appreciate the intention behind any number, or all of the programs that the minister just listed off, but I am more concerned with respect to the way in which the reduction of poverty is being measured. I am back in school, and I have this professor who is always talking about how important evaluation is. It's a very important part for us in the Opposition to be able to understand the targets that the government is trying to meet. That way we have the opportunity collectively, not just in Opposition, but the whole House, has the opportunity to understand what the government is striving for, and how they measure, in this case, poverty reduction - and if they are meeting those targets. Could the minister please clarify the bars she and her department are setting and if they are meeting those targets?

Excuse me. My colleague from Clare is going to jump in here as well.

KARLA MACFARLANE: As the member knows, because I've been talking about a few of them, we have so many different programs ensuring that we can meet the needs of individuals with different needs because we know that they don't all need the same thing.

The success of these programs is based on the fact that we have already evaluated them and have seen their success and the outcome plays a positive impact on the community, but more importantly, on the actual individual who was able to partake in that program - like earlier when I mentioned the young gentleman with EDGE. Hence why I continue to make investments in intervention and prevention.

I think it is really important for us to know that Families Plus and all these different programs we invest in really start at birth for some and they work their way up. A lot of our employment programs that we start with our youth start as early as 12. We continue on that and we will make those investments. I know that for me it was really important to understand how these programs are working in communities. Maybe they don't work in every community. That is why earlier I mentioned about the team that we have that is really connected to our communities in identifying what their needs are.

Maybe the EDGE Program works really well in New Glasgow, but maybe it hasn't been identified as something that is really going to work somewhere else. So one of our other programs can go there. We will keep evaluating them and making sure that the outcomes are definitely worthy of taxpayers' investment into helping those most vulnerable in Nova Scotia.

BEN JESSOME: Can I get the minister to clarify: There are no overarching metrics in terms of poverty reduction from a provincial perspective that the minister is driving towards that she could present to the House? I appreciate that individuals getting through and benefiting from programs individually is an important piece of it. The title is a five-year target for the reduction of childhood poverty. Is there an overall metric that the minister can refer to that sets the bar for what they are trying to pursue with respect to that five-year plan?

KARLA MACFARLANE: I am on record saying that my goal is to reduce child poverty. The metrics that I use are clearly seeing successful outcomes in these programs. We will always continue to have discussions. It never stops. We know we have to do more. It comes from almost every department here in government and all levels of government. I will continue to ensure that every effort is made on my behalf, that I exhaust every level of opportunity and resource out there to ensure that I can do everything to reduce child poverty in the province of Nova Scotia.

BEN JESSOME: I appreciate that. It is kind of frustrating that we don't have specific, tangible numbers with respect to even a percentage the minister is driving for. Though people are successful, perhaps there are instances where they come back into care down the road. How many individuals are leaving the system and staying out and continuing on, versus coming back into the system? I don't believe that I am asking for something that is unreasonable. I think it is very reasonable for the minister to have particular targets with something as important as the reduction of poverty. Perhaps I am

not going to get the answer that I was hoping for today and that is unfortunate because a lot of what I am hearing right now is fairly subjective.

We need to know what our baseline is, what our goal is, if we are talking about achieving it. Yes, there certainly are positive outcomes that can be observed on an individual basis but it is challenging from a system perspective to know that we are actually taking a big bite out of and reducing poverty incrementally.

THE CHAIR: Order. The time allotted for the Liberal caucus has elapsed. I would like to offer the minister a three-minute break.

We'll take a three-minute recess.

[5:16 p.m. The committee recessed.]

[5:20 p.m. The committee reconvened.]

THE CHAIR: Order, please. We will reconvene the Committee of the Whole House on Supply beginning with an hour of NDP questioning.

The honourable member for Cape Breton Centre-Whitney Pier.

KENDRA COOMBES: We're still on child welfare. The minister indicated last week in Question Period that the department has "arrived at what was in my mandate letter, to come up with a five-year target to reduce child poverty." This is just a simple question: Can the minister table these targets and any supporting documents?

KARLA MACFARLANE: To the member, what I recall from last week is that I indicated that in my mandate letter I am to work on a five-year target to reduce child poverty. We continue to work on that while we still continue to make current investments in reducing child poverty - for example the Child Tax Benefit has been increased twice. We could go on with regard to - in my mandate letter, to work across government with other ministers. Working with the Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development in ensuring that we are advancing and making sure that the implementation of \$10-a-day daycare continues and ensuring that that will help reduce poverty.

There are a number of initiatives that we have taken, but I will continue working on a poverty reduction plan as stated in my mandate letter.

KENDRA COOMBES: From that, I am going to assume that we do not have these targets as of yet and that they are being worked on. I will ask another question regarding last week when I asked the minister about the delay in implementing the long-awaited Child and Youth Commission and the minister responded, "This is too important for us to

get wrong,” and I agree absolutely 100 per cent. My question to the minister is: Will we see the creation of this commission in this calendar year?

KARLA MACFARLANE: As the member would know, we had discussed that we heavily invested in consultations. We went right across this province, and I think we met over 180 different organizations and service providers. As well, we had over 1,000 Nova Scotians engage online, providing suggestions and comments. We did get a lot of work done. I am really proud of the work from the department and the help from these organizations and partners. It became clear to us - as we continued to move forward, it was brought to our attention.

We know this happens in the House here a lot, where we hear from people, “Well, you didn’t consult with so-and-so, and you didn’t consult with so-and-so.” We did hear from a few other invested organizations and communities that they wanted to consult further and we agreed that we would continue consulting. We are going to be very careful in - we don’t want to rush. I would love to be able to get this done ASAP and I think everyone would but we know that we have to hear all the voices.

We will continue to put time and effort into this and to ensure that what we bring forward is going to be effective and efficient.

KENDRA COOMBES: The minister and I have actually had this conversation before. We have heard from foster families who have been asked to do visits which are the responsibility of access facilitators and case aides. Foster families doing supervised visits some have deemed a conflict of interest and as well as potential interference. We are just wondering: Is this practice - not policy - but is this practice to ask foster families to facilitate visits?

KARLA MACFARLANE: Absolutely not. That is not something we would ever do, to ask foster families to take on that role. It would be wrong; it would be inappropriate. We value those individuals who represent as case aides. Where would we be without them? They certainly, in my opinion and the department’s opinion, are indispensable. They have a tough job. We rely heavily on them but we also know that we are listening to their concerns. We are working with them on several initiatives to help better support staff and ensure that their needs are being met as well.

They are helping our most vulnerable Nova Scotians. It’s not an easy job - a lot of emotions, but a lot of good things shared too. There are a lot of good stories as well, and good moments. They do have a tough job. I don’t know if the member would be aware, but as of April 1<sup>st</sup>, the department is focusing on the delivery of access and transportation programs under the provincial model. We’re listening. There are some concerns. It’s the first time I’m hearing about them. I want to ensure that we’re going to be able to receive all the information from them and work on providing the much-needed changes that they need.

[5:30 p.m.]

Of course, this model is going to include the changes that are needed to ensure a consistent approach is being taken in supporting children, youth, and families. We want to ensure that we're strengthening and doing what we can to make this program and moment that families are coming together - we want to ensure that we are engaging with staff and identifying best practices that can be adapted across the province.

Right now, we have a little over 90 full-time case aides who are very much part of our team. We have approximately 66 casual case aides across the province, and they are certainly as valuable and are meant to fill in during sick time, vacation time, and they do a wonderful job too. Sometimes they are called in as well when we have to accommodate visits that are outside the regular scheduled time, so we want to make sure that we have enough case aides to ensure that we are meeting the needs of families needing to be with one another. We will certainly continue to hear them loud and clear and try to make improvements with regard to the new model.

KENDRA COOMBES: If that is not the practice, then I would ask the minister to go talk to her district managers, because foster families are being asked to facilitate visits. I am glad the minister brought up the work of case aides because there is one thing that case aides did that was very valuable to our child welfare system, and that was provide detailed notes of those visits.

Under the Liberal government that practice changed, which has caused severe problems, which means that these case aides cannot talk about the good things that occur in the visits with the parents. They can only talk about incidents that occur. So when that child is an adult and they get their file, they are only going to see the bad and not the good. The case aides who do the visits cannot actually talk about anything that happened during the personal visit, and so I'd hope that the minister can also look at that, considering all the good things that our case aides work on.

With that I want to talk about - I am aware and I understand that the Public Service Commission has been looking into some of these severe issues that are occurring with the staff in the Department of Child Welfare, and I just want to know: How is the department addressing these issues to retain staff, specifically around the case aides and access facilitators?

KARLA MACFARLANE: Within our department we have a labour management committee staffed with incredible people who are continuously working with staff. We have approximately 1,600 employees and every job is worthy. Every job is important. We continue to work very collaboratively with any department or any different organizations out there or anyone who wants to come forward and address concerns around working environment or anything like that. We want to hear them. I want to hear from them and the Labour Management Committee does a good job.

I am currently not aware of any issues that I would say would be arising with our case aides. We don't have any vacancies. Currently with case aides, we don't have any vacancies. We don't need any, because we have currently such a high number of casuals. We value the work that they do and we want them to stay and that is why we will review their concerns and ensure that we consider suggestions and make sure that their working environment is conducive and safe. I think it is a good opportunity to mention that we have been working extremely hard in recruiting and retaining social workers. That certainly has been an area that has been of concern. I am proud to say that job vacancies have dropped considerably and we have definitely been able to manage and hire a number of social workers. We will continue working with the Labour Management Committee and doing the best we can to ensure that everyone is feeling safe in their working environment.

KENDRA COOMBES: I know the minister received my letters that I have sent to her on these specific issues. Some of them I am discussing. Others are with the committee and those meetings.

The minister mentioned casuals, and in one of the letters I sent to the minister - or in many - I talked about this with her in the last budget - is that we have full-time workers who are not given a case. They are sitting in the office when they could be working. We are paying them to sit in an office, these case aides, who want to be on the road. That is where they want to be and yet they are sitting in their offices while casuals take on cases. I am going to ask the minister - and I brought this issue a few times and a couple of times here: What is the minister doing to end this practice where it seems that case aides are being punished by sitting in an office while casuals are doing their job?

KARLA MACFARLANE: I know the member has written a number of times and has concerns with regard to the statement about case aides sitting in an office while casuals take on cases. That in itself propelled me to strike this Labour Management Committee, because I want to be able to address concerns and hear about them, but as well as collectively and collaboratively as possible, work together because I think that creating a new model that is going to be consistent across the province - I think that is what lacks here, is that it should be consistent across the province and it is not.

We will certainly be changing the access and transportation model to ensure that everyone has the same experience across this province - that's not just for the clients but obviously for the case aides. We will ensure best practices and provide a program that they are happy with and comfortable with that certainly services our clients to ensure that they are receiving the best services as well. In those conversations and in addressing this with the committee we know that all have to be at that table to talk and that certainly would include managers and directors.

Again, it was struck because we are listening and we are wanting to make those necessary changes. I think we are on the right track.



KENDRA COOMBES: I want to thank the minister for the answer to that question. Before I go on to others, I just want to ask about - it's a simple question but I am hoping that it can be a short answer. What, if any, FASD - Fetal Alcohol Syndrome - supports do we have in Nova Scotia?

KARLA MACFARLANE: Yes, to try to answer the question as quickly as possible. First of all, we are very mindful and concerned about the impacts of Fetal Alcohol Syndrome. It is definitely something that is of great concern through our department and through the Department of Health and Wellness too. We would immediately engage social workers, if they felt it necessary, to engage with the individual to ensure that the appropriate and skilled professionals that would deal with such a situation would be put in place. Again, you would look at the actual issue of that individual who is going through this difficult and challenging time. They may need medical assistance or they may need psychological assistance. We would make sure that there are appropriate professionals in place to provide the resources to do whatever we can to help as much as the individual would allow us.

[5:45 p.m.]

KENDRA COOMBES: Let's go on to some of the budget questions. There was an underspend of nearly \$12 million last year and this year a cut of over \$23 million in spending on income assistance payments, which is on Page 6.7. I understand that this was potentially due to a decrease in recipients of income assistance and that a similar underspend happened last year. Does the department understand the cause of this decrease? Does this lower budget amount mean that this department is anticipating fewer recipients this year?

KARLA MACFARLANE: We do have some ideas around this, and it is not so much that there is a decrease as we are not getting back to the increase as quickly as we thought we would from returning to pre-COVID-19 numbers. We know that the federal investments that were made during COVID-19 helped a lot of individuals, but I also would have to say that we have a very strong labour market currently and I would say that a number of people have returned to work. I am happy to know that we have that strong labour market. It will be interesting to see what the numbers are next year.

Again, I want to reaffirm that this isn't underspent money that we took away or anything. As mentioned before, anyone who meets the criteria to be on income assistance will receive income assistance. It is an uncapped program and I hope that we continue the good work that we are doing and that the labour market stays strong. I would love to see a decrease next year but I can't project out on that. I think that answers the member's question.

KENDRA COOMBES: I would just ask the minister to take a look because some of that labour market and some of those jobs are people holding down two to three jobs. Take that into consideration that that is not an appropriate way to live where you are

working two to three jobs either, because that means you are not spending any time - you don't have any time to yourself. You have no time for your family. You are just trying to make ends meet.

Was an increase in ESIA rates in the budget discussed in the department? With this underspend, was there a discussion in the department to increase the overall rates, and did the minister put forward any requests for this type of funding?

KARLA MACFARLANE: I know the member probably knows this, but budget deliberations and conversations are confidential and can never be shared. I can assure the member that we continue to work extremely hard in our department as well as with our colleagues to look at the different needs of Nova Scotians who are finding themselves in challenging times.

We know that we have invested in a variety of supports. Before Christmas, we made the one-time \$250 investment to income assistance clients. We certainly increased the heating rebate, the seniors - and I know the member knows that the list goes on and on. This year's budget, with an increase of over \$82 million towards the Department of Community Services - I believe that we sincerely put those investments in the right places. We will continue to look at our prevention and early intervention, where we really feel that there can be effective and efficient impacts and outcomes for individuals. We will continue doing that.

Again, I suggest to anyone who knows any individual who is finding themselves in precarious situations and finding that they cannot support themselves and are struggling, and if they are an income assistance client, that the best thing for them is to continue to keep that relationship with their caseworker, to keep them updated on what their needs are. Our lives change daily and their lives change daily. Do they need assistance with transportation? We will be there to provide that. Do they need medical attention supports? We will be there to support them the best way we can.

I am proud to say that we also increased dental coverage. Those numbers hadn't changed since 2014 and we made an increase in changing them for income assistance clients so that they will have better dental. That decision was made just as, of course, when the federal government came out too. We are happy to have both of those programs implemented. We will continue working with individuals on income assistance. There is a variety of different resources that they can tap into. Again, it is really important for them to reach out to their caseworker and say I need this right now. I need extra support here. Maybe it's a special diet and they need extra funding to ensure that they are meeting the needs of their special diet.

We will continue working and nothing is off the table. I am just happy to say that we have a good team that is open to having those conversations weekly.

KENDRA COOMBES: I thank the minister but people on income assistance are living in poverty. No matter what patchwork quilt we manage, they are living in poverty. That can be changed with an increase in income assistance with CPI indexed.

My next question is: The people in Nova Scotia receiving income assistance are only able to earn \$250 per month before clawback. Individuals on enhanced support, which is the disability support, can only - I'm just talking about single individuals because it will take me forever to go through all the different sections, but we will go with single - can only receive \$350 extra working in community - \$350 a month before their disability is clawed back. I am wondering - and this can be a yes or no - is this government finally going to change this policy and legislation of clawing back the supplemental income that people who are already living in poverty have to deal with when they go into the workforce?

KARLA MACFARLANE: I was actually quite excited when this came in under the Liberal government. It is something I think that they deserve the credit for in coming up with what I consider a very progressive model in Canada. It was ensuring that earned income exemption where individuals can keep more of their hard-earned money - actually keep a significant portion of their hard-earned money and what they earn. As the member would know, under the Liberal government this change was made so that if they make up to \$250, they get to keep 100 per cent. Then \$250 to \$500 - it's basically plus 75 per cent of any money earned over \$250, and then \$500 to \$750 - they get to keep \$437.

It's right here under your Liberal government that did it and so if there were better changes that could have been made, maybe they should have been made by the Liberal government at that time. I think that this, again, is one of the most progressive models that is used in Canada. We are having these discussions all the time, looking at all the different programs we provide and resources and looking at where we can make changes. This is one of them that we discuss a lot.

KENDRA COOMBES: I wasn't excited by it. I find it offensive. It keeps people in poverty and so I am not excited about it, Minister. I am sorry. We will have to agree to disagree.

Moving along from that, because it doesn't seem like there is going to be a policy change at this time, could the minister provide the number of how many households on income assistance are receiving an amount equal to or greater than the market basket measure of poverty?

KARLA MACFARLANE: We would have to dig down into a lot of the numbers. We would be more than happy to try to get those answers to the member in the future, very soon. Just keep in contact with us and we will try to get those.

I did want to acknowledge that this government, through the two child tax benefits that we made, lifted 1,600 children out of poverty because of those two investments. Yes,

nothing to get excited about and I realize that. But for these families - they're pretty happy. We will keep making those investments and doing what we can. We have a long way to go, and we realize that. We are trying our very best to meet individual needs. The needs of poverty are very complex and families and individuals require different needs.

[6:00 p.m.]

Again, I can't say enough about ensuring that we are making proper investments. That is what you saw in this budget. We are making huge investments into early intervention and prevention but we still do our very best to help all those in need. We will continue listening and making changes where we can.

KENDRA COOMBES: According to CCPA Nova Scotia, their report says that all of them are in deep poverty and the other point that the CCPA made was that in fact, during COVID-19, and all those numbers that we have at the moment, it was the federal benefits that actually was the thing lifting people out of poverty.

Moving on, the department claims that income is supplemented by other programs. I think the ministers refer to this as patchwork quilt. Can the minister table the analysis they have done that shows that everyone can cobble together enough funding to afford to live?

KARLA MACFARLANE: Again, there is such a number of supports in place, and a variety of supports for a variety of individuals who require different supports. We certainly do not take individuals and lump them into the same category. That is why we are very conscientious of having one-on-one conversations and ensuring that caseworkers are working and forming a relationship and clearly understanding what the needs are of the individuals they are working with.

Again, we have more than any - over 19 months have invested more into a variety of different needs for those who are struggling. If we look at special needs assistance, it provides coverage for expenses related to health and safety and for worker training. That could be medical equipment and supplies, telephone allowance, child care, school supplies, transportation, special diet, personal hygiene - such as haircuts as an example - tools, footwear, work uniforms, furniture, mattresses, and the list goes on and on. That is why I always put emphasis on making sure that our responsibility as MLAs and knowing someone is struggling, that we ensure that they know they can go back to their caseworker and explain what their need is and try to help them get through that. We also have Pharmacare and emergency dental benefits; provide prescription drug coverage and access to emergency dental care; bus passes. It really does help.

We've heard from a number of people, and I see a Liberal member over there shaking their head no, but it was ... (interruption).

THE CHAIR: Order, please. I would just ask the minister to direct the comments towards the Chair, please and thank you.

The honourable Minister for Community Services.

KARLA MACFARLANE: The bus passes are - we hear a lot of great comments with regard to them and we even had a pilot program in Cape Breton that has worked really well. We have an earned income exemption and it encourages recipients to transition to labour market attachment through a tiered exemption structure. We have the Poverty Reduction Credit that provides \$500 annually through quarterly payments to Nova Scotians without children who have received income assistance in the last 12 months. The PRC provides support to Nova Scotians living in poverty who do not have access to the benefits that many families do with children. Employment programming - that I have mentioned earlier - provides employment services and supports to help clients achieve independence from income assistance through employment and youth-focused programs.

Provincial and federal supports have also been available to families and individuals such as the Heating Assistance Rebate Program. Anyone who has a net income of \$85,000 or less received \$1,000. Provincial child care subsidies for children 12 years of age and under - the list goes on. The Child Disability Benefit - a tax-free monthly federal payment to families who care for children 18 years of age and under with severe physical and prolonged impairment in their physical or mental functions. We have the Canada Learning Bond and the Affordable Living tax credit. It goes on and on.

What I always say is that I am committed to work with my colleagues, to work as hard as we can to find other ideas and suggestions and have those conversations. It's not easy. We are doing the best we can. I am proud that this department has had an over \$82 million increase. We are putting those investments into where we feel will be most effective.

KENDRA COOMBES: I asked the minister for an analysis of whether all of these programs that she talked about - has there been an analysis done that shows that everyone could afford - on these various programs - end up affording enough to live. Just from my observation alone I can tell you the answer is no, just from my office.

I am going to move along to another question because we only have such a limited time. There are still 900 Nova Scotians with disabilities living in institutions. Please keep in mind that institutions do not need to be large. They can be small. If a person does not have the ability to go into community and be a part of community, they live in an institution, and 300 are living in nursing homes and hospitals. Can the minister confirm that there is spending in the budget to advance the road map commitments that are already over ten years behind, and if so, how much?

KARLA MACFARLANE: The Disability Support Program has had an 8 per cent financial increase. This budget invested \$42.5 million to give us a total of \$543 million. It is a huge increase - a huge increased of \$42.5 million. Again, an 8 per cent increase.

[6:15 p.m.]

Within that budget I am happy to say that we will be moving out in the next two years - I think probably within the next two years - we will be moving young individuals who have been in long-term facilities. We hope to transition out 200. We have already started that and we are happy to be moving along.

We all know it is a lot more challenging to move individuals who are facing different challenges. We want to make sure that we have lots of discussions with them about what it is they want in their lives. Do they still want to stay in the same community? Do they want to live with someone? Do they want to be on their own? What does a typical day look like for them? Do they want to be able to work, do they want to volunteer, do they want to take a cooking class? We have implemented a program called My Days and many of the individuals who will find themselves transitioning out of Harbourside will be setting up My Days.

Individuals who have been transitioning out of Harbourside will be in different locations across this province. You may have someone who lives in Sydney but is able to transition - a young individual transitioning out of a long-term care facility in Sydney - but they may want to be in the HRM. There is a lot of planning and that takes time. That takes time to ensure that we are meeting their needs and we're having conversations with their network of family and friends and that we get it right.

We all want our communities in Nova Scotia to be able to provide opportunity for all without any barriers, and I believe that we are doing that. The total disability support program budget is \$543 million and this investment has invested in the child and youth programs for families, moving participants from large residential settings to community, as well as the Healthcare Retention Incentives that we provided, and the Flex in-home program. We will definitely be seeing more individuals moving out of large institutions this year, as well as other ones that the member spoke about. This government is actually listening to the needs of these individuals and making sure that they are connected with a caseworker or a social worker who can assist them in making and ensuring that they receive the transition they want to have. They deserve it.

We continue to ensure that we make more investments in independent living options and that all these individuals have the right supports in place to meet their needs. They get to have choice. They have choice and they have options. We know that we are successfully meeting with the Disability Rights Coalition and we are working really well together. I think that we are making some headway and I applaud everyone who has been involved in those conversations from all sectors because that is what it takes - it takes

respectful conversation. You can agree to disagree on some things, but you get through. I think it is really important to acknowledge those individuals who have been working on this.

I was privileged to meet the two independent experts who were hired collectively. We didn't pick them out ourselves. The Disability Rights Coalition had much input and made the decision. Eddy Bartnik from Australia and Dr. Tim Stainton from British Columbia reviewed the system and it will be coming out soon. We certainly will continue to listen to everyone involved. Our goal is to ensure that we move individuals into communities where they want to be and living arrangements where they want to be.

The work of these experts is extremely important because they will definitely guide the Human Rights Commissioner in making his ruling around the system changes needed to transform the Disability Support Program. We are really pleased with the work and will continue doing whatever we can to get it right.

THE CHAIR: Order. The time allotted for the NDP caucus has elapsed. We will return to the Liberal caucus. I just want to remind members that there is no eating in the Chamber. If folks could make sure that if you need a little snack to take a break and then come on back.

The honourable member for Clare.

RONNIE LEBLANC: I have a few questions about French language services for the minister. Prior to COVID, in Clare we had a satellite or sub-office that was open on Tuesdays for which the Department of Community Services provided a bilingual caseworker. We did have a drop box and you could just drop in if you needed to. Coming out of COVID it came to our attention - and the Municipality of Clare's - that the sub-office would only be open by appointment and the drop box would be gone, but the issue of French language services would be a French-on-demand service. That is basically what we have been told.

The Municipality wrote a letter to DCS requesting some clarification. In their response, it was on-demand French services. The municipality wrote a second letter emphasizing the importance of French language services for Clare, especially having a French university with a lot of individuals who do not speak English and being a French community.

I guess the first question I have is: What do French-on-demand services look like exactly? Can the minister explain how that works and how would you access those services?

KARLA MACFARLANE: I thank the member for this important question to his constituency. We always ensure that if the client needs to be serviced in another language,

we do whatever we can to make sure that they have that service provided to them in their language of choice. Sometimes it may have to come from a different office but definitely a connection is made.

I want to assure the member that we are currently actively looking to provide more services in Argyle and Clare because we know the importance of being able to be serviced in their first language.

RONNIE LEBLANC: I guess the follow-up question to the minister would be: How many caseworkers do you have who currently speak French? Because that will decide how easily accessible that service is.

KARLA MACFARLANE: We will certainly get that number to you. I don't have it on me right now.

RONNIE LEBLANC: The other issue as well is the sub-office. Because there is no support staff there, from my understanding it is not possible to do intake services from the satellite office on Tuesday. That means that clients or people who need the assistance of DCS have to drive to Digby or Yarmouth, which can be - return - between one hour to an hour and a half. I know that in the municipality's letter, they were quite - we were trying to explain how vital that service is to our community. I would ask the minister if she could explain if there are any plans to expand that service back to what it was pre-pandemic?

KARLA MACFARLANE: To the member, I certainly would understand the frustration of having to drive an hour to an hour and a half to receive services, but for the member, we have a centralized intake system, so they can certainly call and receive assistance in whatever language they prefer. I certainly don't see the need for an individual to have to drive. If there are specific needs or they did have to, for some reason - because you never know - had to meet someone face to face, we certainly would do our very best to provide that service and meet them but, again, we will continue.

The satellite office is certainly something that is on our radar. We are aware and perhaps in time we will be able to improve that somehow. Again, please know that our services - the intake line is centralized and anyone can call at any point in time. We will make sure that they receive their language of choice, and if they have to see someone one-on-one, we can arrange something.

RONNIE LEBLANC: The only other question I have on this line of questioning is the last letter that the Municipality of Clare sent was on January 26<sup>th</sup>. I had a number of councillors ask me if I would relay the message that they hadn't yet received their response. If the minister could provide a response to the letter, that would be greatly appreciated.



KARLA MACFARLANE: I recall a response so I am not sure if there was just an overlap or someone didn't receive it. We will look into it, but we certainly recall responding.

[6:30 p.m.]

RONNIE LEBLANC: Just another quick question around, I guess, disability supports. We all know that housing is a challenge for a lot of people, especially people who are having to deal with DCS. I have a number of constituents who have come who were on CPP disability hoping to get a bit of support from DCS to help pay with medication and dental and different things, but when they went through the intake process, technically they were considered boarders and not renters under Policy 4.4.1. The explanation I have received is that if you are on CPP you get \$780, \$782. If you are considered a renter you can get up to \$950, but if you are boarding the maximum amount you can get is \$608.

In this case, because they don't have a lease or they are considered boarders, they can't access a little bit of support that they would need to pay for the medications and different . . . I don't know if you can comment around that policy, seeing as how the housing situation has changed drastically and anybody, especially those on lower incomes, are fortunate to find housing, I am questioning if the policy is still relevant today. Maybe the minister could comment on that.

KARLA MACFARLANE: I thank the member for the comments, really - not so much a question. I want to let the member know if he needs to take something offline we can certainly have a discussion if it is in relation to a specific individual that we can't have, obviously, a conversation on the floor about. I don't disagree. There are some concerns definitely, and I definitely wanted to let the member know that we are always looking at policy changes and where we need to make those. I would say that this one is an active conversation.

RONNIE LEBLANC: I would appreciate having that conversation if the minister is willing to meet with me. So with that, I'll pass the floor to the member for Cole Harbour-Dartmouth.

THE CHAIR: The honourable member for Cole Harbour-Dartmouth.

LORELEI NICOLL: We spoke a lot about a lot of the services and we always hear about wraparound services. At Community Services I asked - trying to define what those services actually are. It is interesting right now, when it comes to homelessness, the use of hotels for the homeless. I just wonder with regard - because I just got an email. It tends to be people at the municipal order of government who get inquiries about what the plan is. I get an email and it is from a councillor and they say, "Well, that's not us. That's the province." There is a lot of this going back and forth as to who is going to address the unhoused.

I just wondered if the minister could speak about what the arrangement is currently with the DoubleTree Hotel in Dartmouth and what are the wraparound services so we can just see what the plan is. I mean, it's been in the media, of course, quite a bit, but I just wondered - just to discuss about the arrangement that is being made. There is also another email in my inbox asking me about the former Future Inn in Highfield Park as to what the plan is for that. They are saying, Well, here one is empty and here is one that is functioning as a hotel, so which one is . . .? I just wanted to know - like put it out there in the public so that people actually know how we are addressing and how you are using the hotels to respond to the homeless situation.

KARLA MACFARLANE: Thank you for your patience. There was a lot in that and I want to be able to make sure I broke it down. I think I am going to start with your last question with regard to our relationship with municipalities and how we work together. Absolutely - homelessness is definitely under my jurisdiction but we work with many municipalities that are trying to address the situation as well, because we know that within the HRM area there is quite a large population of homeless individuals. We have an outstanding relationship with HRM council - in particular the Mayor and I speak quite frequently together and our office and his office speak on a regular basis. Every other day we speak.

The member may be aware that last week we made an announcement together where there was an initiative that was established by HRM to have a 24-hour drop-in centre, but they said that they wouldn't do it - or couldn't do it - without the support from the provincial government if we would split the cost.

We announced last week \$750,000 to go toward that drop-in centre that is open 24/7 with the HRM. We will make that investment with them to help with their operational costs. There are a number of details yet to work out but we are very proud of that. We are very proud of other initiatives that we have collectively worked on together. We will continue the great relationship we have. We are proud of the work we have established together and we will continue that.

With regard to hotelling, hotelling has been a used practice across Canada in all jurisdictions. It certainly is not something that we prefer but oftentimes we need to have hotelling. It could be in the case that someone's house flooded or maybe there is an individual who has to escape domestic violence, weather conditions. We have had many relationships and continue to have good relationships with hotels across the province, mostly, of course, with the HRM area. We use them in extreme weather conditions to ensure that we reach as many homeless individuals as we can to get them out of the cold and be able to put them in a safe environment and ensure that they have a warm meal. If we can't find them emergency shelter or supportive sheltering of any sort, we will put them up in a hotel.

I would say that with regard to our model of wraparound services we can take a look at The Overlook that we have partnered with the North End Community Health Centre. It is a great relationship and the province should be very proud of this model. It's the only model east of Quebec and we hope to be able to implement more if necessary.

When we talk about wraparound supports, we are talking about providing individuals with various needs, some very complex. We are providing drug and alcohol reduction counselling to individuals. We are also providing financial support and ensuring them and helping them to set up bank accounts and how to budget. We provide them help with skill sets to find employment and help them determine what is it that they would like to do. We provide counselling on all levels and we provide some medical needs. At these wraparound supportive housing initiatives, we are really tailoring to an audience that is unique and they require different needs but we are making the appropriate investments. I think I answered the member's questions. I know there were quite a few there but if I missed anything, I am sure they will let me know.

LORELEI NICOLL: Well, specifically my question was: What is the arrangement with the DoubleTree Hotel and I didn't get that in the response. My question is, because this is Estimates on the budget: What is the cost, and how sustainable will it be year over year? How much did you provide for hotelling last year and how much are you providing for it this year?

KARLA MACFARLANE: Thank you. I am sorry about that. I answered three of the four questions, I guess, but I did forget the last one. As I mentioned earlier to my other colleagues, we are currently still working out a few things at the DoubleTree. What I did indicate is that anyone who is currently staying there will not be displaced. They will be remaining with us. As well, we are just finishing up some details on that and hopefully by the end of the week there will be a public announcement. As indicated as well, there are approximately 80 people who are working there but we certainly, at this point in time, will not disclose the amount that is being discussed. We certainly know that - we will continue discussing that, the lease - what we are going to be doing there, and you will know more by the end of the week.

LORELEI NICOLL: Yes, well, it is always interesting when we talk about the budget and the appropriations, yet when you are asked a question about what is in the budget, we are told we can't discuss it. Would you give us an amount - ballpark, even - as to what is in the budget that you put in place for hotelling and how much it was more than it was year over year. It's not necessarily that you have to have an actual - I would just like to know what I am approving in this budget in regard to hotelling.

KARLA MACFARLANE: In this budget we have \$26 million that is toward shelter-supportive housing and there is actually an increase of \$8.2 million put in this budget to get it to \$26 million and this is the first government that has ever done this. We are very proud of the supportive housing model. We are proud to be putting this money

into investing and ensuring that we are looking after our homeless individuals and people who need supportive housing. Again, there will be some individuals who may end up exiting and finding more permanent housing or something changes in their life, but we are very proud of putting \$26 million towards this in this budget.

[6:45 p.m.]

LORELEI NICOLL: Thank you, and I am pleased as well, because we all know this is the result of the pandemic. Previous governments would not have been having to deal with it and the amount of homelessness that we are faced with and I am glad to see it is being addressed.

I am now going to pass the mic on to my colleague, but I think you might have to change up staff because it is the Status of Women that she wishes to ....

KARLA MACFARLANE: Okay.

THE CHAIR: The honourable member for Clayton Park West.

RAFAH DICOSTANZO: We can move on to Status of Women, no problem? Perfect. If I may just start with the budget, I see the forecast for 2022-2023 was \$22.32 million and for this year it has come down about \$4 million. Can you explain why is it less than last year, and how many employees are employed at the Advisory Council on the Status of Women now who have moved into the Community Services offices? How many were employed previous to this move, and how many do you have now? Is that the cause of this decrease of \$4 million or . . .? If you can just look at the numbers and give me the numbers of staff that you had prior to moving the department into Community Services.

THE CHAIR: The honourable Minister for the Advisory Council on the Status of Women Act.

KARLA MACFARLANE: I am going to answer one part of the member's question but I will have to get them to repeat the last part of it. I want to draw the member's attention to the fact that budget to budget, there was actually a \$4 million increase. You are looking at - the forecast shows the \$8 million. That \$8 million was given to our nine women's centres and transition centres or homes, and we made that investment because we are acutely aware of the needs of those centres and transition homes in order to fight domestic violence and gender-based violence, and to continue to help them do the great work that they do. Again, with the Nova Scotia Advisory Council, we have increased it by \$4 million and \$3.8 million of that was implementation of action plans against domestic and gender-based violence.

Point 2 would have been improved just for the cost of living increases that you would see throughout the whole budget under all kinds of departments for a total of an increase of \$4 million exactly.

RAFAH DICOSTANZO: Sorry, what I am seeing here in the budget - so the forecast, which is what you spent in 2022, correct? The forecast shows what you spent, which is \$22.232 million, but what we are estimating for 2023-2024 budget is \$18 million. I see a reduction rather than an increase. If you could highlight that, please.

KARLA MACFARLANE: Again, if the member will look at the forecast, there has been an \$8 million increase because we made a one-time payment to the women's centres and the transition. So you would see it. Yes.

RAFAH DICOSTANZO: That was last year you added \$8 million but not this year. You are out \$4 million. (Interruption) It was a one-time - okay. Now we go back to how many employees - once you move a department into Community Services, how many employees did you have before the move and how many do you have now, and have we lost any positions?

KARLA MACFARLANE: I would like to let the member know that there have been no changes with FTEs. It stays the same.

RAFAH DICOSTANZO: I know there was some retirement. Have those been filled? Stephanie, for example, and other positions, have they been filled? Every position that we had, have they been filled?

KARLA MACFARLANE: Yes, that position still exists. It is being filled temporarily right now, but we will certainly be filling it permanently in the future.

RAFAH DICOSTANZO: My second question would be about the Standing Together to Prevent Domestic Violence strategy. Our government established in 2018 a strategy for four years, and the current government has decided to extend it, which is wonderful. One of the evaluations from the report on the strategy said that they would look at specific cultural issues to understand these issues and what they are going to do to help newcomers. One of the things they were going to work on was the newcomers, and where domestic violence is much more normalized and face cultural barriers in accessing this. Has there been any money put towards that to help newcomers with domestic violence? Is there any increase in the budget for that?

KARLA MACFARLANE: I thank the member for this important question. It is definitely on my radar and as we continue discussions around the National Action Plan it is part of the conversation. I want to assure that cultural issues and nuances will be addressed - are being addressed, actually, as we speak. It is part of the plan. I wish I could share right now. We've invested in over 80 different projects. I don't know the details

exactly of each of those 80 different projects but I know that certainly some of them have no doubt been identified or have implemented culturally relevant best practices, I would hope, and that the evaluation that showed us that domestic violence, as we all know, is very complex and very serious.

I know that not one organization holds the ability to solve it and we know that different cultures have - it's hard to explain but - I don't want to say different reasons for domestic violence, but we know that certainly it is more prevalent in other cultures. We will continue having those discussions with our federal counterparts. I am really happy that we continue on making the investments and standing together.

[7:00 p.m.]

We know that last Fall when the federal Minister for Women and Gender Equality and Youth, Marci Ien, was able to come to Pictou County and be part of the federal/provincial/territorial event, it was one of the big discussions that we actually had. We announced the National Action Plan and we know that right now we are working out what that looks like. Just recently - about a month ago - I was able to briefly discuss with the minister again that we are going to be making headway and ensuring that we tackle this most important issue to ensure that we end gender-based violence.

RAFAH DICOSTANZO: I can go back to that but I have a few other questions that I don't want to miss. Can you give us an update on the Domestic Violence Resource Centre and how much is allocated for this in the budget?

KARLA MACFARLANE: I believe that the member is looking for a number for transition houses - \$7.1 million.

RAFAH DICOSTANZO: I thank the minister for that. What other supports in this budget to support advocacy to stop violence against women? Also, we are hearing from quite a few organizations across the province that we spoke to that they were concerned that the term "advocacy" itself was being removed in their negotiations for funding. Is that accurate? Was that done on purpose? If you can, explain why.

KARLA MACFARLANE: Absolutely not accurate. It is absolutely not accurate. I am not sure where that is coming from. It could have been something that was started by someone but it is not accurate at all. We fund the women's centres, the transition homes. Any of our service providers - that we always ensure that whether it is directly in their mandate, they know that the funding that we provide them is to continue advocacy. That has not changed for us. So just to put that one to rest, no. Absolutely not, we haven't.

RAFAH DICOSTANZO: I had a Zoom meeting with this organization and so I would be happy to clip this and show it to them and make sure and get back to you within

an e-mail, if you don't mind. I remember it clearly that was said to us that the word "advocacy" was removed. I am happy that it is not and will make sure . . .

Let me just - I am trying to choose. We have 15 minutes, which is good. We had a delay in the campaign school for women wanting to run for office due to COVID-19 and so we are overdue for our next campaign school. Are there funds in this budget to support the campaign school for women wanting to run? I know that the Status of Women ran one of the - I think it was 2019 - over 100 women attended that event. It was wonderful. Are we doing anything new? Are we doing the same kind of campaign school that we did in 2019? Is there any money in the budget for that?

KARLA MACFARLANE: Thank you so much and yes. Campaign schools are fun. I was able to partake in presenting in 2014 or 2015 and it was wonderful. At the time, Minister Regan was present as well. She made a presentation as well as past member Maureen MacDonald, who was very, very interesting and had a lot of stories to share. This government continues to invest. We continue to provide an online campaign school. We will continue doing that.

I am trying to think of different ways that we can expand within rural areas. It is really important for me to look at the rural areas, which I find - certainly individuals find it much more difficult to partake or to get involved. We are always looking at ways for that but certainly funding remains at \$100,000. It is in the overall budget of \$9.2 million but certainly available funding is there.

RAFAH DICOSTANZO: I believe in 2019 we had a lot of women from outside of Halifax who came. They put them in a hotel, they helped them, so there was a huge - and I thought that was one of the best campaign schools we have ever had in this province. It was all organized by Status of Women and it was very well run. So we can include them as long as we offer them an overnight stay. I hope that we will run that school in person and offer it to all women from other parts of the province - maybe hold it somewhere else. As long as people have room to stay they will come. I am hoping that the minister will look into it and repeat it now that COVID-19 is no longer an issue - or are hoping it won't be.

My next question, just quickly: If organizations also need support to support women's health, such as abortion and contraceptive appointments, will the department support them and is that reflected in this budget?

THE CHAIR: The honourable member for Clayton Park West.

RAFAH DICOSTANZO: Maybe my microphone wasn't on. I apologize. If organizations also need to support women's health such as abortion and contraceptive appointments, will the department support them and is that in the budget somewhere?

KARLA MACFARLANE: We certainly applaud our transition houses and women's centres across this province. They do very important work. They are there for individuals when some of them are at their lowest and during their darkest days, and we will continue supporting those organizations. Again, we have made in transition houses - \$7.1 million, and into women's centres - \$2.8 million.

We don't dictate to those organizations what exactly they have to do. We trust that - we stay in contact, of course, and we are aware of the different services that they provide - but we don't exactly mandate what they have to spend their money on. Some may use it for operations and some may spend more on counselling. I hope that answers the question.

RAFAH DICOSTANZO: I think it does. I am not sure. If it comes from DCS - I know we help women who are on income assistance to be covered for most of the contraceptives except the IUD - that is only the hormonal one, I believe, and not the more expensive one. That was the only thing that I know - women on income assistance are allowed to get the pill and the hormonal IUDs, which I believe is \$200 instead of the more expensive one, which is \$300 to \$400 dollars. I wasn't sure if that is in the budget to help more women. We want the right one.

The last question that I have is: Many organizations we speak to that help women and gender-diverse folks need sustainable funding and not just a one-time top up. We know the minister recently gave some top-up to the important organizations before the budget. Does the budget commit to sustainable funding increases to the organizations?

KARLA MACFARLANE: Again, as previously outlined, we have been ensuring that there is ongoing, stable funding for these organizations. We have never reduced that. In fact, we have increased that, because we know that it's challenging times and inflationary costs and to run these organizations, their overhead costs, we know the struggles that they are facing. That is why during such challenging times we made that \$8 million investment to help them. We will continue to make those investments with them and to ensure that they can provide the best services and care to the clients who are seeking help from them.

RAFAH DICOSTANZO: I wish I had the name of the organization - I met with two or three different organizations and one of them said it is just so difficult to plan and we won't know until the budget. They don't get the same amount and they know for the next three years they have this so they can staff it. This is what I heard. I am just saying it to you. I don't need you to answer that.

If I may, for the last four minutes that I have, if we can have - I just want to continue the question that my colleague from Cole Harbour-Dartmouth asked about the hotels. If we could have this number of people who are in hotels in this last year - how many people were housed in hotels last year in 2022, and how many were housed so far in 2023? What was the budget for last year compared to this year and what is the average stay? How many



of them - I've heard that one was there for seven to eight months. What is the average number of nights that you are housing people in hotels?

[7:15 p.m.]

KARLA MACFARLANE: Currently we have approximately 200 individuals in hotels. Ask tomorrow and it could be 150 or maybe 250. This is something that is very flexible and nimble. Our goal is always to be there to help and ensure that we are able to temporarily help someone be sheltered. As mentioned earlier, our goal is always to find permanent housing. Some individuals find themselves able to move on within a night or two, or a month - others sometimes have to stay a few more months. Again, we work directly with them. We ensure that they are in contact with a housing support worker to ensure that they can have their long-term goals met.

We know that everyone is looking to have a safe, stable environment to call a permanent home for them that they can go home to every night, a sense of belonging, and ensure that it is their place in a community where they want to be. We will continue using hotelling as a method to ensure people will be safe from harm's way. It certainly is not ideal but I think people feel that this is a new program or something that we have been using. This has been going on for decades and decades and some years - certainly there is an increase and other years, not so much. It just depends on the individual needs of the client or the person needing it and they are not always income assistance clients, as all of us would know in this Chamber. There are various reasons why people find themselves homeless. We will provide support where we can.

RAFAH DICOSTANZO: In my last ten seconds, if I may get the numbers for 2021-2022, how many - just the total number ...

THE CHAIR: Order, please. The time allocated for the Liberal caucus questions has elapsed.

The honourable member for Halifax Needham.

SUZY HANSEN: I want to say first before I start that I want to thank the department for all their time and effort that they put on the information, and working with clients, and doing all this work. We know that it is not an easy job. We thank you for that and as well to the minister who has been talking for a number of hours.

My first question is: How much funding will be dedicated to Standing Together, the Province's initiative to prevent gender-based violence?

KARLA MACFARLANE: I thank the member for being patient. I just wanted to make sure that I was given the correct information because it is enrolled into the overall budget. If you break it down, Standing Together is \$3.5 million, but you have to remember

that currently we are in negotiations with the federal government to leverage more funding. I certainly wouldn't mind following up with the member when we finalize those negotiations but currently it is \$3.5 million.

THE CHAIR: I just want to note that we will actually conclude in three minutes so the minister has time to wrap up.

The honourable member for Halifax Needham.

SUZY HANSEN: Sounds good. Thank you, Chair. In my next question I was going to ask about the negotiation but when you get that information - the negotiated amount with the federal government - I would love to have that.

My next question is: I know that my colleague already asked a similar question, but will there be increases in core funding to women's organizations? As was mentioned, there was lump sum funding and while it is appreciated, it is not the same as sustainable funding and I know the minister knows that. I am just wondering: Are there increases to core funding to women's organizations in particular, to help them be sustainable?

KARLA MACFARLANE: To the member, I confirm that we absolutely support core funding. The transition homes are very stable but I would like to let the member know that certainly things come up and we have been responsive. When they've needed extra, we've been there. As the member would know, just recently is the \$8 million that went between women's centres and transition centres. As well, since I've become minister, I have actually increased the core funding that goes to our women's centres.

We will continue being responsive to their needs. We know they do great work. I am very proud of the work that they do but when there is a challenge, we are there to meet their needs.

SUZY HANSEN: I am just wondering: How much more have you implemented in the core funding over your time here?

THE CHAIR: The honourable Minister Responsible for the Status of Women Act with three minutes to respond and then go into your final remarks.

KARLA MACFARLANE: Okay. To the member, I have increased it by \$500,000, a half a million in 19 months I've increased it.

I want to take this opportunity first of all to thank all the members for their very thoughtful questions. I appreciate the concern for their constituents, and of course, I want to take an opportunity to thank my colleagues here with me and for all the support of all my colleagues who are in the West Gallery. They have been most supportive in the last 19 months and I can't thank them enough for everything that they do.

**Resolution E4 - Resolved, that a sum not exceeding \$1,299,913,000 be granted to the Lieutenant Governor to defray expenses in respect of the Department of Community Services, pursuant to the Estimate.**

**Resolution E30 - Resolved, that the sum not exceeding \$4,393,000 be granted to the Lieutenant Governor to defray expenses in respect of the Office of L'nu Affairs, pursuant to the Estimate.**

Again, Chair, I am very pleased that there has been an increase to the Community Services budget of over \$82 million. I realize there is a lot of work to be done and we have a very dedicated and committed team to getting where we have to get. Thank you so very much.

THE CHAIR: Shall Resolutions E4 and E30 stand?

Resolutions E4 and E30 stand.

That concludes the consideration of Estimates.

Order. The maximum 40 hours allowed for the consideration of Supply has elapsed. We will take approximately a 10-minute recess to let the Subcommittee join us and then we will consider.

[7:29 p.m. The Committee recessed.]

[7:48 p.m. The Committee reconvened.]

THE CHAIR: Order, please. The Chair of the Subcommittee on Supply.

DANIELLE BARKHOUSE: Speaker, I am pleased to report that the Subcommittee on Supply has met for the time allotted to it and considered the various estimates assigned to it.

THE CHAIR: Shall the remaining resolutions carry?

The resolutions are carried.

The honourable Government House Leader.

KIM MASLAND: Thank you, Chair. I move the committee of the Whole on Supply do rise and report these Estimates.

THE CHAIR: The motion is carried.

[The Committee adjourned at 7:47 p.m.]