

HANSARD

NOVA SCOTIA HOUSE OF ASSEMBLY

COMMITTEE

ON

VETERANS AFFAIRS

Thursday, May 19, 2022

LEGISLATIVE CHAMBER

Transition from Active Service to Veteran and Homelessness Prevention

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VETERANS AFFAIRS COMMITTEE

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[Hon. Ben Jessome was replaced by Braedon Clark.]

[Nolan Young was replaced by John A. MacDonald.]

In Attendance:

Kim Leadley
Acting Legislative Committee Clerk

Karen Kinley
Legislative Counsel

WITNESS

Department of Community Services

Tracey Taweel, Deputy Minister

Joy Knight, Executive Director, Employment Supports and Income Assistance

Halifax Regional Municipality - Division Chief Emergency Management

Erica Fleck, Assistant Chief of Emergency Management

VETS Canada

Debbie Lowther, Chair and CEO Co-founder

Royal Canadian Legion - Nova Scotia/Nunavut Command

Valerie Mitchell-Veinotte, Executive Director

Ken George, Service Officer



HALIFAX, THURSDAY, MAY 19, 2022

STANDING COMMITTEE ON VETERANS AFFAIRS

9:00 A.M.

CHAIR
Chris Palmer

VICE CHAIR
Danielle Barkhouse

THE CHAIR: Order. I would like to call this meeting to order. This is the Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs. My name is Chris Palmer, MLA for Kings West, and I'm the Chair of this committee. Today we'll be hearing from representatives from the Department of Community Services, Halifax Regional Municipality, VETS Canada, and the Royal Canadian Legion Nova Scotia/Nunavut Command.

At this point I would ask everybody present to turn off your phones, put them on vibrate or silent. In the case of any emergency that may happen, we ask that everybody exit through the Granville Street exit and walk to the art gallery courtyard across the street. I would ask that you keep your masks on during the meeting unless you are speaking.

At this point I would like to ask all of our committee members to introduce themselves for Hansard please.

[The committee members introduced themselves.]

THE CHAIR: This morning our topic is the transition from active service to veteran and homelessness prevention. Our witnesses include, from the Department of Community Services Tracey Taweel, Deputy Minister; Joy Knight, Executive Director, Employment Support and Income Assistance; Halifax Regional Municipality Division Chief, Emergency Management, Erica Fleck, Assistant Chief of Emergency Management; VETS Canada, Debbie Lowther, Chair and CEO/Founder; Royal Canadian Legion Nova Scotia/Nunavut Command Valerie Mitchell-Veinotte, Executive Director; and Ken George, Service Officer.

I just realized as I did that, I introduced yourselves for yourselves, but at this point I would like to ask everybody for the record to please state your name and where you represent.

[The witnesses introduced themselves.]

THE CHAIR: I would like to thank you all for appearing. Welcome to our committee. At this point I would like to ask if any of our witnesses would like to have an opening statement.

Ms. Taweel, we can begin with you.

TRACEY TAWHEEL: Good morning, committee members, Mr. Chair, and to my colleagues who are appearing here today. Thank you very much for the invitation to appear and to discuss the important topic of the transition from active service to veteran and homelessness prevention. I'm joined today by Joy Knight, to my right, the Executive Director of Employment Support and Income Assistance.

I'd like to begin by extending my gratitude to veterans in Nova Scotia and across our country, as well as all the brave Canadians in uniform, who have served and continue to serve in times of war, conflict, and peace.

I am aware, as well, that the Canadian Armed Forces perform many additional important functions, such as search and rescue, patrolling our air space and territorial waters, supporting anti-drug operations, and assisting in the aftermath of natural disasters. Our veterans have ensured the continued preservation of our country's freedom and the values that we as Canadians hold dear. It's important that we all do our part to support them as they transition from active service.

There is no question that having a place to live provides stability, security, and a sense of belonging. The reasons for homelessness are varied and complicated. They may include uncertain physical and mental health, challenges relating to addiction, lack of affordable housing, and community and family breakdown. Given rising costs, people who aren't experiencing these challenges are being impacted by affordability.

Veterans experiencing homelessness may experience additional challenges, certainly related to their service and the impacts of their experiences. They may face unique barriers as they transition to civilian life. Any Nova Scotian experiencing homelessness, including veterans, deserves to be safe, feel supported, have shelter and be treated with dignity. According to our most recent statistics, between January 2021 and March 2022, less than 2 per cent of Nova Scotia's homeless population was identified as veterans.

The Department of Community Services does not have a program specifically for veterans, but we have services for all people who find themselves homeless. Our staff will work with veterans to help them access additional federal services that are available to them. We work with our counterparts at the federal government through Veterans Affairs, as well as with non-profit organizations that serve veterans.

The department connects those experiencing homelessness with a housing support worker who will assess their needs and walk through the services available to them. This could include emergency shelter beds, income assistance options, rent supplements, housing search support, and even placement in permanent housing with wraparound supports. Case workers also make sure that veterans know what federal supports are available and how they can access them.

Over the past several years the Department of Community Services has recognized the need to move away from a crisis-driven system to one that is preventive and responsible. Our goal is to provide more supportive, permanent housing for people across Nova Scotia. The 2022-23 provincial budget saw an increase of \$16.7 million to invest in homelessness and supportive housing strategies. This increase will allow for 10 new housing support worker positions, bringing our total to 41 across the province. Also, we'll cover funding for volunteer-based shelters in rural communities and more.

Some examples of other recent initiatives include, in partnership with HRM, the emergency overnight shelter in the city was extended until June 30th, to ensure that people experiencing homelessness have a safe and warm place to sleep as cold, overnight weather continues; \$4.2 million has been provided to Out of the Cold Community Association to provide services such as harm reduction support, life stability and community connections and employment support to those living in the Dartmouth and Halifax modular homes.

The province provided \$3.5 million to help purchase the former Travelodge in Dartmouth. It has been renamed The Overlook. It will provide permanent supportive housing for 60 individuals, plus an additional five units for respite care. In addition, the province will pay ongoing costs of \$1.5 million annually for wraparound supportive services.

Finally, \$1.8 million was invested with the Mi'kmaw Native Friendship Centre for Diamond Bailey House. It will provide culturally responsive programming, as well as 32

transitional beds and 21 rental units to urban Indigenous individuals who have experienced homelessness.

We are also working on the development of a supportive housing approach, which will provide the framework for supportive housing models across the province. This is a multi-departmental effort, working with the Department of Municipal Affairs and Housing, the Department of Justice, the Nova Scotia Advisory Council on the Status of Women, the Department of Health and Wellness, and the Office of Addictions and Mental Health, to ensure we build a continuum of supports for Nova Scotians who need assistance.

The initiatives, progress and work to date is really just a beginning. We know that finding a home is life changing. We know there is much to do, and there are many Nova Scotians looking to us all for solutions. This is a complex problem but I'm confident that over time we can address this challenge and make positive, lasting change.

THE CHAIR: Ms. Knight, do you have any opening comments? Okay. Ms. Fleck.

ERICA FLECK: Good morning, everybody, again. My name is Assistant Chief Erica Fleck from Halifax Regional Fire and Emergency. I am also a serving veteran, having stayed in the Canadian Armed Forces Reserve Force upon my transition to HRM in 2018.

First of all, I want to say that there are homeless veterans on the streets throughout Nova Scotia. There aren't many but, in my opinion, one is too many. Having homeless veterans is not an easy problem to solve. There are myriad issues that would have contributed to them being homeless.

One example is a man who I met last Fall who had been homeless for years. He released from the Canadian Armed Forces in the early 1990s and he had severe PTSD. When I first met him, he wanted no help whatsoever and just wanted to be left alone.

After visiting him every day with a sandwich, a coffee, and a package of cigarettes, and engaging VETS Canada, he was offered a hotel room, and then a unit in the upcoming spots that the province and HRM had placed on Alderney Drive as part of the response to homelessness. He declined both and just wanted to be left alone.

As Winter set in, and with the work that VETS Canada was doing with him with their caseworkers, he very slowly changed his mind. It took months. It was not an easy task. He hadn't filed income tax returns in years. He did not have a Veterans Affairs Canada account, and the list went on.

After several months, VETS Canada and VAC started to make progress. He now had a phone. He could check in with his caseworkers and was starting to see a future. He is now living in his own apartment, thanks to VETS Canada. He has groceries and is getting

the supports that he needs. It's not perfect, but he's off the street and that is a happy example.

One more example, and I have many, is a member with whom I had served. He released from the military with myriad mental health and addiction issues, including gambling. He couch-surfed for a few years and was not allowed contact with his children for years due to the fact that he didn't have a fixed address.

Why, you ask, would someone receiving a pension and a large payout from VAC be living like this? Very simply, VAC gives lump sum payments to individuals who are injured as a result of military service. When you have someone with addiction and mental health issues, giving large sums of money is generally, although not always, a recipe for disaster.

With no financial counselling and generally no supports left in place when people leave the military, they are left to making their own decisions and those aren't always the right or prudent ones. This former soldier received \$100,000. He is no longer couch-surfing. He has a small apartment with very few furnishings and often cannot pay his bills to this day. He is checked on by former army soldiers and often fed by them as well. This peer support group tries their best to keep him on a good path.

There are homeless people claiming to be veterans, as well, but unfortunately not telling the truth. That is very unfortunate as advocates think that the system is not looking after them when, in fact, mental health and addiction issues have them making false claims. It makes it even harder to advocate for them when they aren't honest with service providers and the advocates.

Veterans from both the Canadian Armed Forces and the RCMP will generally not reach out for help due to the proud nature of their serving their country. They often will hide issues from family and service providers so they are not looked down upon. There are very few outreach options available to veterans who are homeless, especially outside of the larger core areas across Nova Scotia.

Veterans are not receiving the support they deserve when they are released from the Canadian Armed Forces or the RCMP. I will say that the systems have improved greatly over the years, but there are still large gaps that exist as we've seen with the numerous inquiries into these issues.

THE CHAIR: Ms. Lowther, do you have an opening comment?

DEBBIE LOWTHER: Good morning, Mr. Chair and committee members. Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you once again. We feel that it is vital to keep the dialogue going as it pertains to Canadian Armed Forces and RCMP veterans who are experiencing difficulties, including homelessness and the potential for homelessness.

I realize that some of you may already be familiar with VETS Canada, but I will give you a Coles Notes version for those of you who are not. We were founded here in Halifax in 2010. We aim to provide immediate aid to veterans of the Canadian Armed Forces and RCMP who are in crisis, at risk of becoming homeless, or those who have already become homeless.

[9:15 a.m.]

Since 2010, we have evolved into a national federally-registered charity. Although our reach is large, we have remained small in a staffing perspective. We typically operate with seven staff members across the country but are down to four at the moment.

We believe that our strength is in our volunteers. We have hundreds across the country, including me. The majority of our volunteers are veterans, members who are still serving, or military family members which lends to an effective element of peer support that we have learned is very important.

We connect with veterans who are in crisis in a variety of ways. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, our volunteers conducted what we call Boots on the Ground walks where they walked the streets and visited shelters. Veterans themselves will reach out to us through our website, our social media platforms, or our 24/7 crisis line. Veterans are also referred to us by other organizations or agencies. The majority of our referrals, sometimes almost 90 per cent, come to us from Veterans Affairs case managers.

Since the last time I was here, we have evolved further. In September 2018, we opened a drop-in support centre in Ottawa. In December 2018, we launched a housing support project in Edmonton in partnership with the Government of Alberta. In January 2019, we moved our national headquarters in Dartmouth to a larger location to accommodate a co-located drop-in centre. In addition, we have taken possession of three transitional apartments - one in Vancouver and two here in Halifax.

To elaborate on the housing project with the Government of Alberta, early in 2018, the government purchased a 15-unit apartment building with the intent to use it specifically for veterans. They put together a working group of stakeholders to develop a plan for the project.

In the end, the plan was that the apartment building would be used as transitional housing for veterans. A veteran's service centre would also be opened nearby to be staffed by trained social services workers to provide the crucial wraparound supports to the veteran tenants of the building, as well as other veterans who were in crisis, homeless, or at risk.

The government asked VETS Canada to take the lead on the project. We were tasked with hiring and overseeing the staff and all operations of the centre, including triaging the veterans to determine their suitability for tenancy in the apartment building.

Since 2010, we have learned a lot about veterans' homelessness. We have learned that there is a uniqueness that sets it apart slightly from homelessness in general. To understand veteran homelessness, we must first understand that serving in the military is not just a career. It is a culture all on its own. When you serve in the military, it becomes your identity. Military members are those who are willing to lay down their lives in service to their country, and in order to do so, they develop incredible bonds with their fellow military members. Unfortunately, this experience leaves some veterans reluctant to seek out or even accept help from civilian organizations as they don't feel understood.

There are many pathways to homelessness, such as poverty, lack of affordable housing, job loss or instability, mental illness and addictions, physical health problems, family or intimate partner violence, and family or marital breakdown. What sets veterans apart is that not only do they deal with these same issues, but they are also struggling with their transition from military to civilian life and feeling as though they have lost their identity, and doing so without the social support network of people who understand them.

Over the years, we have responded to thousands of requests for assistance, with 19 per cent of those coming from here in Nova Scotia. To be clear, not all of those are homeless. The majority would fall into the "at risk" category. This makes up the majority of our work, and we know that homelessness prevention is crucial. It is much easier to keep someone in their home than to find new housing - particularly at this time, when there is such a shortage of affordable housing.

In Nova Scotia, only 8 per cent of all of the veterans that we have supported were experiencing absolute homelessness. Thirteen per cent were emergency sheltered, 15 per cent were provisionally accommodated, 54 per cent were at risk of homelessness, and 10 per cent were securely housed, meaning they came to us for other reasons besides housing.

As we all work to end veteran homelessness, we believe it is important that policymakers consult with folks on the ground positioned to provide an accurate picture of the situation: veterans with lived experience and organizations who work in the homeless-serving sector. To that end, over the past eight months, we were asked to participate in a series of round tables hosted by the housing policy directorate of Employment and Social Development Canada. The first couple of round tables were explicitly focused on veteran homelessness, and the last one was focused on chronic homelessness in general.

For the round tables focused on veteran homelessness, we were asked to invite a couple of veterans with lived experience. I can tell you without a doubt that the two

veterans we invited made a valuable contribution to the conversation. We would like to see these important conversations continue in the future.

THE CHAIR: Ms. Mitchell-Veinotte.

VALERIE MITCHELL-VEINOTTE: Good morning. We, my senior service officer Ken George and I, are pleased to witness before you today and join our colleagues in the community who care for veterans and their families.

The mission of the Royal Canadian Legion is to serve veterans - including serving military and RCMP members and their families - to promote remembrance, and to serve our communities and our country. The Royal Canadian Legion was founded in 1926 by veterans and for veterans. We advocate for the care and benefit for all who served Canada, regardless of when or where they served.

The Legion collaborates with key stakeholders, such as the Veterans Ombudsman and the Veterans Consultation Assembly, to identify challenges and press for change to ensure that veterans and their families receive the care and benefits they deserve. The Royal Canadian Legion firmly believes this country has a solemn obligation owed to our military and to the RCMP.

In addition to national advocacy efforts, the Legion works at the provincial and local levels to advocate for veterans and their families. The Royal Canadian Legion's Veterans Services Network works on behalf of veterans to ensure they receive all earned entitlements and benefits. The Legion's Veterans Services Network includes volunteer Branch Service Officers who are the eyes and ears of the Veterans Services Network at the grassroots level.

Branch service officers assist veterans by identifying those with unmet health needs, then making appropriate referrals to professional Command service officers at the provincial and territorial level who, as mandated by legislation, provide assistance, representation, advocacy, and advice at all stages of the Veterans Affairs disability claim process free of charge, whether or not the veteran is a Legion member.

In 2019, Nova Scotia/Nunavut Command Veteran Services Bureau handled 877 Veterans Affairs Canada files. We were directly responsible for over \$13.1 million awarded in financial lump sums for VAC disability claims, and 18 new monthly pensions and increases. In 2020, we handled 813 Veterans Affairs Canada files and were directly responsible for over \$19.5 million awarded in financial lump sums for VAC disability claims, and 14 new monthly pensions and increases. As important to these monetary payouts are the medical benefits given to each person for the rest of their lives.

Financial assistance is available for veterans and their families in need through Poppy Trust Funds at the branch level, and at the provincial-territorial level through Nova

Scotia/Nunavut Command's registered charitable Benevolent Fund. Emergency assistance - defined as shelter, food, fuel, clothing, prescription medication, and necessary transportation - is extended to those who qualify through the Benevolent Fund. Assistance must provide a solution or contribution to a solution to the problem that gave rise to the need. Clients either present directly to Nova Scotia/Nunavut Command, are referred by VAC, the CAF, RCMP, and other veteran-centric organizations, or through Royal Canadian Legion branches.

Included, too - speaking to the issue of transition, under the umbrella of the Benevolent Fund - is the Nova Scotia/Nunavut Command's Veterans Outreach Program. The program's mission is to provide enrichment to veteran lives and to assist in the transition to civilian life through connection to recovery-oriented care, programming, social services, and peer support. By fostering and forming mutually supportive partnerships with established community resources, health care professionals, all levels of government, and like-minded individuals, Veterans Outreach Programs offer a hand up.

The Legion helps thousands of veterans and their families each year and makes significant positive changes in their lives. We welcome this opportunity today to participate in the discussion surrounding veteran homelessness and transition to civilian life. We would be happy to answer any questions related directly to those specific topics.

THE CHAIR: Thank you very much to all of you for your opening comments. Before we move to our question round, I neglected to mention for the purposes of Hansard, that I acknowledge the presence of Legislative Counsel Karen Kinley and Acting Committee Clerk Kim Leadley.

We will now begin our round of questioning. The method of our committee is that we will go random questions, and I will just recognize hands as we prepare to ask questions, so raise your hands if you would like to ask questions. We will probably do questions until 10:40 a.m., and then we will move on from there. At that point, we will ask each of you if you'd like to have a few closing words.

MLA Barkhouse.

DANIELLE BARKHOUSE: First, I'd like to bring attention to the date, May 19th, which marks the founding day for the Canadian Armed Forces, so happy anniversary.

My first question to VETS Canada is: Can you tell us about your volunteer roles, finding housing for veterans, and perhaps if there are any success stories you could share? Is finding suitable accommodations part of your volunteers' usual tasks?

DEBBIE LOWTHER: Thank you for the question. Our volunteers will help veterans find suitable housing. They do not replace housing support workers. The volunteers act more as a peer support role. They help the veteran search for the housing.

They will accompany them to visit those potential housing options. They will help them with budgeting to determine if they can afford that particular house or accommodation.

As I said, our volunteers are mostly still serving veterans, so they do provide a great element of peer support. They often act as a kind of mediator between the veteran and potential housing associations or Veterans Affairs, or any other organizations. One example that comes to mind is that we had a veteran who had been chronically homeless for a long time. We had worked with him on and off, and never really to any success. Then we got him housing, and the volunteer who was assigned to him was very dedicated, and stuck with that veteran, would check on him periodically.

We received a call from the housing support worker at the shelter and said, what is the secret? This gentleman has been housed over and over again and has never been able to maintain that housing, what did you do? The only thing we did that was different was we kept in contact with the veteran. We checked on him to make sure he was doing okay, to make sure he was attending the appointments he needed to attend. That's a little bit of the role that our volunteers would play.

THE CHAIR: As per the practice of our committee, I will allow for a follow-up question if it is pertaining to the previous question that was just asked. We would ask that you keep it to that, if you need clarification about something, but not ask a new question.

MLA Hansen.

SUZY HANSEN: One of the questions was how many. I was given the information, which I am grateful to hear, but at the same time, I think all of us around the table are saying that one is too many. We know that. Our veterans have served this country proudly, and we need to respect that.

In one of this committee's meetings, Ms. Valerie Mitchell-Veinotte mentioned that the ban on evictions had temporarily taken a huge pressure off the funds being used to help their clients with housing. As well, she said that you end up expending huge amounts housing veterans and their dependents in hotels until you can find other housing.

My question is - and it could be to any one of the organizations here: How much money has been spent by your organizations on hotel rooms over the past few years? We know that there are very few options for affordable housing. How long have they stayed, on average?

THE CHAIR: This question, who is it directed to?

SUZY HANSEN: Well, I know Ms. Valerie Mitchell-Veinotte spoke to that the last time, so I do have that information, but if anyone else would like to speak to that. Maybe

the Department of Community Services could add to that. If anyone else would like to add in, that's fine.

[9:30 a.m.]

TRACEY TAWHEEL: Thank you very much for the question. Currently, we have \$1.3 million budgeted for our Shelter Diversion Support Program, which supports individuals in hotels. I couldn't provide you with definitive numbers in terms of length of stay. Our goal is always to have it be a very temporary and short-term measure, really to provide stability, and allow for connection to happen with a housing support worker, or any other supports that are required to help an individual become rehoused.

I wanted to pick up on a point made a moment ago about the success story told. I think that applies certainly to the population that we're talking about today and it is critical. I think we have seen across the board that that is the key to helping individuals who have multiple barriers and challenges to remain stably housed: that wraparound support, that ongoing care and relationship.

The housing support workers really play a key role in that. So do service providers at the community level, as well as local community members. We certainly see that in rural parts of the province where local community members - and organizations such as those that are represented here today - and many others believe it is part of their community obligation to wrap around individuals.

Through the supportive housing program that we're developing, we will be looking to leverage those kinds of supports because we recognize that. Obviously, if we can help people to remain housed and not enter homelessness, that is the ideal. There does need to be a continuum of supports and hotelling - providing people with space in a hotel if they reach the point where they have become homeless - will remain, and is a component of the supports we provide, and will continue to provide.

THE CHAIR: MLA Clark.

BRAEDON CLARK: I have a question for Ms. Lowther. You mentioned earlier the project that was done with the Government of Alberta, which was quite interesting to me. I am just wondering: Has the possibility of something like that ever been considered here in Nova Scotia or not? If so, what has the response been?

DEBBIE LOWTHER: It has not been duplicated in other provinces yet. As far as here in Nova Scotia, we did have several conversations with the previous Premier and explained the entire project to him. There were no commitments made, but there was a great level of interest.

BRAEDON CLARK: Perhaps you may have mentioned this in your opening remarks, and I may have missed it, but what has been the outcome in Alberta? Has it been very successful? What have been the lessons learned there?

DEBBIE LOWTHER: It has been successful. Some of the lessons we've learned are things that we kind of expected going into it. We always had a feeling that veterans really don't want to be housed together in the long term. We talk about transition to civilian life. If we're going to put them all in the same apartment building, that's not really transitioning them.

There have been some issues sometimes within the apartment building. Rank comes into play. We have veterans in those buildings who are of different rank levels - Reserve, regular Force. Sometimes there's a lot of back and forth, as there is in the veteran community in general. I would say that's probably the biggest issue. That was part of the reason why we decided to make that transitional, because veterans don't want to live together in the long term. I would say that's the biggest issue we've faced.

THE CHAIR: MLA Barkhouse.

DANIELLE BARKHOUSE: Deputy Minister Taweel, I'm just wondering: Could you give us a progress update on The Overlook?

TRACEY TAWHEEL: As I believe members would be aware, government has invested - as I mentioned in my opening remarks - in 60 supportive housing units that will permanently house currently homeless individuals, as well as five respite beds that will be at the former Travelodge, now known as The Overlook.

Much work has been under way to fully and completely renovate The Overlook. With current supply shortages right across the construction sector, there have been some challenges securing all of the supplies that are necessary to complete the renovations.

Some may question why such significant renovations were required, so perhaps I can elaborate on that for just a moment. It is a former hotel. We are basically converting it into individual apartments, so you can imagine the amount of work that is required to put kitchen facilities in. To our earlier comments around wraparound supports and programming supports, North End Community Health Centre will be providing very intensive wraparound support and programming options for all the individuals who live at The Overlook. So there needed to be some renovations completed as well to allow appropriate programming space.

The key with The Overlook is that we want this to be a warm and welcoming place, and a permanent home for individuals. I think the renovations will really help ensure that individuals who live there will be safely and securely housed there over the long term. Our hope is that we will be able to provide a firmer date in terms of when The Overlook will

open in the coming months. It is very much tied to supply issues. The contractor working on site, as well as our partners in the federal government and at the municipal level - everyone is very keen to see The Overlook open as quickly as possible. They are willing to work overtime to make that happen. They just need the supplies in order to do it.

DANIELLE BARKHOUSE: You mentioned North End Community Health Centre is going to do some wraparound. What other service providers are going to be there supporting the residents of The Overlook, and what types of support will they have in place there?

TRACEY TAWHEEL: The North End Community Health Centre will be the service provider on site. They will ensure there are supports, including psychological supports, addictions counselling - all the supports that are required, including on-site nursing support, medical support, peer support - everything you can imagine that would be required to help individuals stabilize and remain securely housed. There will also be employment supports, helping individuals who are able to connect with employment opportunities, and helping individuals to connect with volunteer opportunities.

I think it's really important to note that everyone wants to contribute meaningfully, and it is not our role to define what that looks like. The peer support and the other supports that will be in place will help individuals find their way and find their path forward with all of the supports that they need to live the life of their choosing in the most fulfilling way possible. That's our model. It is unique. What the North End Community Health Centre has done, and what they're developing, is a unique model. We'll be watching very closely to see how we can replicate that model in other parts of the province, how it can be built upon.

There are also a lot of learnings from the work that the Mi'kmaw Native Friendship Centre, for example, is doing as they move closer to opening up the Diamond Bailey House. Culturally responsive supports will also form a part of the wraparound supports. I would say that my colleagues here today have a lot to offer as well in terms of - if any of the residents in The Overlook are transitioning from active duty to civilian life, we need to ensure that the supports are appropriate to the comments that my colleagues here have made.

We do need to make sure that we are providing very specific supports to those individuals as well and thinking about what peer support looks like for someone who has transitioned from active duty.

THE CHAIR: MLA Taggart.

TOM TAGGART: My question is to Deputy Minister Taweel. How does rural homelessness look with respect to veterans? How does it look different than the urban homelessness?

THE CHAIR: MLA Taggart, your mic was off.

TOM TAGGART: Sorry about that. With respect to what support is available in rural communities.

THE CHAIR: Ms. Taweel.

TRACEY TAWHEEL: I will begin. I expect my colleagues here probably have a much deeper understanding of the exact challenges faced by veterans in rural parts of the province. I can speak more generally to the supports that are in place in rural parts of the province. I think within the last, I would say, probably two years, the levels of homelessness have been increasing in rural parts of the province, or at least our understanding and knowledge have been increasing.

Homelessness has existed in this province for a very long time. It has largely been invisible, with the exception of those of us who, perhaps, are tasked with seeking it out and looking for it. COVID certainly shone a spotlight on homelessness when individuals could no longer couch-surf or move from friend to friend. When that was no longer an option for individuals, we began to see increased challenges. Certainly, recent investments and new programs have opened the door for individuals to be more open about the challenges that they're facing from a housing perspective.

From a rural perspective, we have recently made investments across the province to help stabilize largely volunteer organizations to ensure that they can have stability with the number of beds that they can provide. In some instances, we can help previously-volunteer organizations hire staff so that they can meet increased demand. We've also worked with organizations to create smaller shelter-diversion support programs to use local hoteling options.

Our partnership, I would say, is less established right across the province, but we do have partnerships right across the province. We're working to support those volunteer organizations to stabilize their organizations and meet what they are rightfully flagging as increased demand.

THE CHAIR: MLA Harrison.

LARRY HARRISON: My question will be for the deputy minister. Could you speak about the particular challenges that Indigenous community members face when they're facing homelessness?

TRACEY TAWHEEL: Indigenous community members face unique challenges when they are experiencing homelessness, related to - and it will not surprise any member of this committee - systemic racism, related to intergenerational poverty challenges that the Indigenous urban population has experienced for decades. That is part of the reason why

we work in partnership with the Mi'kmaw Native Friendship Centre and have provided funding for the Diamond Bailey House - to ensure that there are appropriate supports for Indigenous Nova Scotians who find themselves homeless.

[9:45 a.m.]

The supports that are being designed by the Mi'kmaw Native Friendship Centre involve first-voice consultation with individuals who are currently homeless or were formerly homeless, to seek their feedback on what their needs are and how to best provide that support. Additionally, as I understand it, there will be a component that will ensure a reconnection with land-based healing - a reconnection with culture, with history - which is sorely lacking in the supports that the Province has funded to date.

The Mi'kmaw Native Friendship Centre, their colleagues and their associate supports that exist in Mi'kmaw communities across this province are experts in this area. They have long looked to the Province for the support that they require to provide support to the homeless Indigenous population. We're very pleased that we are able to fund the Diamond Bailey House and to work in a very collaborative relationship with the Mi'kmaw Native Friendship Centre to meet those needs.

THE CHAIR: MLA Duale.

ALI DUALE: First of all, I thank you all for being here today. Quite honestly, this is one of the committees that I am proud of, and I feel good being part of this committee. The reason I say that is because although we belong to different Parties, and have different perspectives and ideas, I feel it is one thing that we are united in. Rightly so, because these men and women have served this nation with no conditions, and it is our responsibility to serve with no conditions - irrespective of what we have in mind.

One thing that also makes me happy with my testimony is to see the three levels of government sitting here today. We see the provincial level, we see the municipal level, and we see the federal level. That shows me that I think we have the will to serve our members of our service.

What I'm interested in is how often you work as a team. Sometimes we entangle these three levels of government, and sometimes when people ask things they say, "Oh, we have nothing to do with this, this is a municipal issue, this is a provincial issue."

I'd like to know, as a team, how often you work and how you are connected with your service. Thank you. Anybody can answer - the deputy minister, the members, Service Canada, the municipal.

THE CHAIR: Ms. Mitchell-Veinotte has her mask off, so Ms. Mitchell-Veinotte.

VALERIE MITCHELL-VEINOTTE: Thank you for that question and for identifying that we actually speak from various levels in witnessing to you today.

As mentioned in my opening remarks, the Royal Canadian Legion partners with any resource in order to meet our goals and objectives. While VETS Canada is a national organization, they are home-grown in Nova Scotia.

I've been with our organization in this position for 12 years - around the same time as VETS Canada actually stood up in the Province of Nova Scotia. We have collaborated. VETS Canada knows that we are there to support them. We know that VETS Canada is there to work in partnership with us. We also know that every level of government is available to us as well. So we enjoy an excellent working relationship with each level of government and every veteran-centric organization that falls within the province of Nova Scotia.

THE CHAIR: A follow-up, MLA Duale.

ALI DUALE: Is there any challenge that we should be aware of and assist you to alleviate that difficulty? Is there any disconnect? Is there anything we could do that we should be aware of to help you to connect more and to collaborate more?

DEBBIE LOWTHER: One of the challenges - and I'm not sure that it's something you can help with, but just to identify that challenge. As Valerie said, we often work in collaboration, and we know that not one organization can fix the problem - we have to work together. It's more helpful when each organization knows what the other is doing. We've had situations - not here, but in other parts of the country - where different organizations are stepping over each other, doing different things. Then when you come back together you realize that one organization has done something, and the other organization has done the exact same thing, and it can become overwhelming for the veteran.

Sometimes it's most helpful to have one point of contact, while there is a circle of care, it can be overwhelming for the veteran. But again, not one organization can solve it all.

THE CHAIR: Ms. Taweel, would you like to answer that as well?

TRACEY TAWHEEL: I completely agree with the comments of my colleague. The only other comment I would like to add - and I think it came through in opening remarks - when an individual, be it a veteran or another Nova Scotian, becomes homeless, their needs are varied and complex. I believe Ms. Fleck highlighted it very well in the story that she told related to trust and the length of time that it sometimes takes to support an individual to move to a more stable housing arrangement.

There are a lot of individuals wrapping around homeless Nova Scotians, trying to provide that support, be it at a peer level or at a professional level. There are a lot of supports being provided and being offered. I think it's really important for us all to understand that it takes a long time to build that trust. If there are complicating factors related to PTSD, addiction issues, and mental health challenges, sometimes it can't happen quickly. It needs to be a slow, dedicated commitment to wrapping around individuals to help them transition from this situation that they find themselves in to stable housing.

I can't say enough about the work that happens through these organizations, and also through housing support workers, outreach workers and the Department of Community Services intake workers. There are legions of individuals who are working to provide the support.

At the end of the day, I think we just need to recognize that sometimes the process is slow, and it requires an ongoing dedication and commitment to supporting individuals. I think that's a significant factor that we all always have to keep in mind.

THE CHAIR: MLA MacDonald.

JOHN A. MACDONALD: This question is to Deputy Minister Taweel. You've given us an update on The Overlook. I was wondering if you'd give us an update on the modular homes that are for Halifax.

TRACEY TAWHEEL: As the committee would be aware, the modular homes in Dartmouth have opened. By all accounts, the individuals who are living there are very much enjoying living there. The wraparound supports are working well. A bit of a community has formed there, which is lovely. The individuals who live in close proximity to the modular homes, other residents, have very much welcomed individuals who have moved into the modular homes. That's wonderful. It's exactly what we want to see.

With regard to the Halifax modular homes, our hope is that they will be up and running in early June. They are just about ready now, as I understand it. The Out of the Cold Community Association needs to hire staff and train their staff in order to support individuals who will live there. They are in the process of hiring the staff who will be required and ensuring that all the appropriate supports to support individuals who will live at the Halifax site are in place so that there is a seamless transition when individuals move in.

SUZY HANSEN: I'm going to touch on that because I just have another part of that question. It's been moved to June for opening. I'm glad to hear that the Dartmouth modulars are doing well, and that the wraparound supports are there. I'm just wondering: Why is it taking so long for the modular units to be ready and why wasn't this work started before the police removed temporary shelters and tents?

TRACEY TAWHEEL: The modular units were procured by HRM. It was an initiative of the municipality. The province's contribution is to support the operational support and to fund Out of the Cold. There were some delays acquiring the modular units initially.

What I would say is that while it was challenging for many individuals to have to wait because of those delays, the modular units that are now erected and in place are providing exactly the kind of living support that we had hoped. If you've not had a chance to see those modular units, they are lovely. They will provide that kind of community-based feeling that we were hoping to create.

Out of the Cold Community Association is a fantastic organization, but until very recently were a volunteer-based organization. We have provided them with ongoing funding to be stood up as a fully-funded-with-staff professional organization. As you can imagine, it takes a little bit of time for them to get their feet under them. They've done a fantastic job. Their team, their executive director - I can't say enough about the work that they've done.

To hire for the Dartmouth site, it took a little while for them to get all their staff in place and trained. Initially as well at the Dartmouth site, the modular units opened but the kitchen wasn't ready. It took a little more time. This was a new experience for everyone, so the engineering required, if you will, to have them fully functioning took a little bit longer than anticipated.

On the Halifax side, Out of the Cold has been actively recruiting to get their staff in place. Like all sectors, it's a challenge to recruit the right individuals to support the residents who will live there. Ideally, we would have loved to have this open sooner, but I am confident that when it does open, it will open without any hiccup and with the full and complete wraparound support that Out of the Cold is now providing in Dartmouth.

SUZY HANSEN: This is really quick. I know I spoke to the minister about this while we were in our last sitting. She advised me that they would be ready, obviously not now, but previous to, and they were just waiting on the service providers. We would be the ones as a government providing the service providers.

I know that HRM has been ready, and then I find out now that we're still waiting on our end to make sure that the service providers are ready. I just want to clarify that, because I have been in connection with the city to make sure. It's in my riding, so I'm very aware of what's happening. I want to stay connected, so if there's a way that we can keep that level of communication open, that would be wonderful.

TRACEY TAWHEEL: Yes, absolutely, we can keep that open.

THE CHAIR: I wasn't sure if that was rhetorical or not.

Our next order, just so we know: I have MLA Clark, MLA Barkhouse, and then MLA Taggart. MLA Clark.

BRAEDON CLARK: I think one of the most difficult things that governments do at all levels is anticipate problems and deal with them before they become acute problems. We see that issue in health care, we see that in education, we see that in community services across the board.

I'm interested in something that Ms. Lowther said, and then anyone else who wants to chime in, please do. The issue around obviously veterans who become homeless - that is the most difficult outcome - but I think you mentioned 50-some per cent of the people you deal with are precariously housed, which is people living on the knife's edge of housing insecurity. That is a really hard spot. The deputy minister mentioned earlier that sometimes those people can be a bit invisible because they're not on the street, but they're obviously not in a great situation either.

Over the past couple of years through the pandemic, through housing challenges, has that proportion grown significantly? If so, how do you help those people so that they don't slide down the scale and, in fact, slide back up to a more secure level?

DEBBIE LOWTHER: To answer the question of has that grown, yes, it has since the pandemic. It has become an issue. We have veterans who have transitioned somewhat successfully from the military and gone on to have a second career, but then unfortunately, we saw some of those people lose their jobs as a result of the pandemic. So there are a variety of factors at play there.

As far as what we do to help somebody who's at risk - if somebody comes to us with an eviction notice, for example, we would reach out to the landlord and make arrangements that if we pay the arrears rent, is the person going to be able to stay there? We would cover things like that to help them be able to stay, or utility bills. If somebody's at risk of having their power disconnected, we would look after that bill.

It's not just a band-aid solution. We then would also work with the veteran to figure out exactly what the problem is - why they are falling short, why they cannot make their monthly commitments. Sometimes it is just a mismanagement of money, or one of the big things that we see is veterans waiting an extremely long time for decisions on their disability award claims through Veterans Affairs. Then sometimes veterans who release, wait for quite a long time to receive their military pensions. A lot of times we will just help that person get through, bridge that period, to get them over the hump until that income starts rolling in.

THE CHAIR: Ms. Fleck.

ERICA FLECK: I just want to add to what Ms. Lowther said, and she covered a lot of the topics. The biggest issue is the delay in receiving pension cheques. The quickest that a pension cheque will be received is six to eight weeks. So that is six to eight weeks with no income whatsoever, for somebody who is transitioning.

[10:00 a.m.]

Pre-pandemic, the statistics were 87 per cent of retirees were taking a second job because they would not afford to live on pension alone. Again, that transition, that gap while waiting for benefits and pensions to kick in, is a large contributor to the precariously housed. So you are starting at a deficit right off the bat, and then trying to dig yourself out of it. What I personally found in dealing with people is that is the biggest contributor - and then always trying to play catch-up. Of course, with the pandemic, as Debbie mentioned, a lot of people lost their jobs, so the hole just kept getting bigger, and no way out of it.

THE CHAIR: Ms. Taweel.

TRACEY TAWHEEL: Just one final point to augment - I think that's an important point around the six-to-eight-week gap. I really just wanted to put it on the record that in some instances those individuals may qualify for income assistance. That transitioning from active service to civilian service - they may not necessarily see themselves as potential clients of the Department of Community Services, and I completely understand that.

I guess what I would say is that perhaps there is more collaboration that we can do to do more proactive outreach, so that individuals are not in a position where they are waiting those eight weeks with no income. It may be that some individuals would qualify for income assistance and/or a rent supplement, or something.

Right now, the onus is on them to seek us out. I think that working collaboratively, perhaps we can find a way to proactively seek them out. One of us sitting here today, and other organizations, are probably aware of supports that are needed, and maybe can help make that connection. That's the point I wanted to make.

THE CHAIR: MLA Barkhouse.

DANIELLE BARKHOUSE: This one is for Ms. Mitchell-Veinotte. I'm wondering if you could give us a sense of how many veterans are homeless. As I ask this question, I realize there must be some challenges. Could you maybe explain some of them as well?

VALERIE MITCHELL-VEINOTTE: I can tell you that in the last year and a half the Nova Scotia/Nunavut Command has advocated and represented 19 veterans who were shelter insecure. The last time that I witnessed before you, we did discuss that the moratorium on evictions during the pandemic actually was a great benefit to us, and that

we identified the risk of homelessness greater within the province of Nova Scotia than actual homelessness.

In that same period, 19 identified as housing insecure and two were actually homeless. Those two individuals who were homeless were homeless due to personal choices they made, and their homelessness was temporary. We were able to keep them in hotels until they could both make arrangements with family members to take them in.

When individuals contact us, normally the majority approach us before they are actually out on the street, so that we can provide the supports to have them stay in the housing, if they're able to, and to provide the financial supports that also accommodate them staying where they are in their current shelter, in their current homes. Not only would we be providing rent, but we would be making sure all of the utilities were paid, and that there's food security. We deal with a lot of families, so the veterans whom we deal with are not individuals affected by their situation. It's their dependents and often a spouse.

When they identify with us, if they haven't been a VAC client, I sort of arrange the aspect of support within our organization - those types of supports through our benevolent funds and through the Poppy Fund from the branches. Then I pull in my service officers, and we begin to examine the service, and if there's any entitlement or benefits that the veteran may be able to make a successful application to VAC for. My service officers then would represent that individual right from the first application process straight through to the award, which if it's justified also comes with medical care for themselves and possibly for their families.

I think that we should mention, too, that although we're far from perfect in how we process applications through Veterans Affairs Canada, they - Veterans Affairs Canada - have made several much more responsive changes, I have found, in the last four to five years. Others within the veteran assistance community would also say the same. They're much more responsive to providing emergency funding. Certainly, we have a direct line to them, as I know VETS Canada does as well.

There are great changes coming into effect for all of the transition services for the CAF this Spring, actually. Those changes and those transitions within the transition centres are scheduled to actually begin this month.

Generally speaking, it was, I would say, up until about four or five years ago, a major problem in that pensions were delayed well beyond six and eight weeks. We are actually seeing that time lag come down and that Veterans Affairs Canada is more responsive when there is that gap and the veteran doesn't necessarily have supports. We, too, would step in during that period and make sure that the veteran and any dependents or family are securely housed, have good nutrition and have good supports available to them.

There have been changes. They are not quick in coming, but we do recognize that there is certainly, as I said - in the 12 years that I've been here - a change in the responsiveness by the federal government and by Veterans Affairs Canada. We enjoy excellent contact and excellent collaboration with the case managers at Veteran Affairs Canada, especially here at the district office. With 100 branches in the province of Nova Scotia, to speak to the rural aspect, we do have people on the ground who are there to assist veterans in the smaller communities and throughout the whole province.

I do hope that answered the question.

DANIELE BARKHOUSE: I realize that this follow-up might be answered by Ms. Mitchell-Veinotte or Deputy Minister Taweel. I'm just wondering if we are seeing any particular gender differences around homelessness.

THE CHAIR: Ms. Taweel, you had your mask off first.

TRACEY TAWHEEL: Approximately 60 per cent of the homeless population that we serve are male, and roughly 40 per cent are female, or identifying as female. I can't break that down with regard to the veteran population beyond roughly the number that my colleague provided here and that roughly 2 per cent of the population that we serve identify as veterans.

VALERIE MITCHELL-VEINOTTE: The difference that is very clear to us is that very often female veterans who are shelter insecure - that also includes food insecure and an entire suite of insecurity, quite frankly. But generally speaking, the females that we work with usually have children and dependents. The availability of shelter and housing in those cases provides barriers and challenges that we don't necessarily find when we are dealing with single male veterans who are housing and food insecure.

THE CHAIR: MLA Taggart.

TOM TAGGART: My next question is for VETS Canada, but if you don't mind, I never really got a chance to properly ask Ms. Lowther and Ms. Mitchell-Veinotte about rural homelessness. I appreciate what Ms. Mitchell-Veinotte commented on about having the Legions across Nova Scotia, which is a great benefit.

Before I go to my initial question, can I use this as a follow-up? Do either of you ladies have additional comments you would like to make with respect to supports for rural veterans, or homeless?

DEBBIE LOWTHER: As you can imagine, it is more difficult in rural areas. There aren't as many resources. In rural areas, as Valerie said, there's a Legion in every area, so in the more rural areas, we will collaborate with the Legions - but it is very difficult with supports. Often our volunteers will work with a veteran to transport them into the bigger

urban and suburban areas to help them access those supports. We also rely more heavily on church organizations and those sorts of things, but it's definitely a challenge.

[10:15 a.m.]

THE CHAIR: MLA Taggart. I'm feeling generous, so I'll give you another question.

TOM TAGGART: If I could, before I go to my question, I know that both Ms. Fleck and Ms. Mitchell-Veinotte have comments, I think. Am I allowed to do that?

THE CHAIR: I'd like to have us ask one question, if possible, and keep the follow-up to the topic of the first question, MLA Taggart, if possible.

TOM TAGGART: I will go to my question for VETS Canada. Can you tell me about the challenges that veterans face with pre-existing mental health issues - what they might face when attempting to secure housing? I'm sure that's a challenge. It's often maybe why they're homeless. Could you speak to that a little bit?

DEBBIE LOWTHER: There definitely are challenges when it comes to housing. Unfortunately, we have had experience where landlords, when they learn that a potential tenant is a veteran, their mind automatically goes to PTSD. So there's a little bit of discrimination that happens.

Having said that, we also see the flip side of that. We also see landlords who will grab on to a veteran and say, "That's the tenant I want." But when it comes to mental health issues, it definitely plays a role. Often there are times when veterans who do have mental health conditions - unfortunately, because of their PTSD - their behaviour is not always conducive to living in an apartment building with neighbours. So it definitely does come into play with housing.

THE CHAIR: Thank you. Our next three questioners will be MLA Harrison, MLA Duale, and then MLA MacDonald.

MLA Harrison.

LARRY HARRISON: Thank you, Mr. Chair. My question is going to be for VETS Canada, as well as the Legion.

We know that homelessness is probably better addressed proactively. Can you speak about how your organizations prepare military personnel to transition into civilian life?

DEBBIE LOWTHER: It is difficult, and there have been changes made within the Canadian Armed Forces when it comes to transition. There have been strides made to improve that transition process. Most bases and wings do what we call a scan seminar, which is a second career assistance network. It looks different on every base, it's not consistent, which is unfortunate. They will bring in organizations. Basically, it's to inform the member who is releasing about resources and things that are available to them. Veterans Affairs would be there to make them aware of the benefits that they might be entitled to when they release.

We have had the opportunity in some places to be included in those scan seminars, so that's the best that we can do. We do maintain a close relationship with the Canadian Armed Forces to make our presence known, so that members who think that they are going to be in trouble when they release know about us. We have had members reach out to us and say, I'm going to be releasing soon and I know I'm going to need you.

VALERIE MITCHELL-VEINOTTE: We do attend all of the scan seminars that are held within the province. We also - except, of course, during COVID - have a semi-permanent office in the transition centres. The one in Nova Scotia is actually in Windsor Park.

We also have ongoing partner working relationships with organizations such as OSISS, which is the Operational Stress Injury Social Support programs, both on the peer side and the family side. We also participate in mental health fairs that the Canadian Forces actually sponsor, and put on at the Windsor Park base, Shearwater, Sydney, and in Greenwood on an annual basis.

We have the opportunity then, through all of those means, to ensure that those who are transitioning are aware of the resources that are available to them - not only through our organization, but that we can represent them and advocate for them through the Veterans Affairs disability and entitlement process.

We utilize every opportunity possible, but it is still surprising that many who we have identified directly to us, who are housing insecure or are homeless, are actually those who have left the CAF and have been out in civilian life for a number of years. It's not usually the folks who are retiring or releasing in the past, say, 10 years who are unaware of the services that are available to them. It's those who have been released and who have been out of the Canadian Armed Forces for 15, 20 years and beyond, who aren't familiar with what resources are available to them. Many will walk into us and say, I have no idea why I didn't do this years ago - because their lives become much easier, and they are cared for.

THE CHAIR: Thank you. MLA Duale.

ALI DUALE: First of all, just to give you a background of the topic that we're talking about, we as a committee, when we're making the decision about what topics that we need to talk about this year, we vote for them. This was one of the top topics that we decided to talk about. It was intentional, because COVID has opened a lot of wounds for our society and our communities. The purpose was not only to know what is happening to our men and women, but also how to prevent something from happening.

What I'm interested in is, Ms. Taweel, we as a province, do we have any action plan that will prevent this from happening, and what are those plans?

TRACEY TAWHEEL: The members may be aware that the Province does have an Integrated Action Plan to Address Homelessness, so that is one component of our homelessness strategy. In addition, I think where I'd like to focus my response is on the development of the supportive housing program that we're working on now.

I referenced it earlier, but really this would be the first of its kind in this province, where we will bring together a model that will offer a continuum of supports right from the prevention through the supports required when an individual finds themselves in a situation where they are, in fact, homeless. This model will include consideration of addictions, mental health needs, and physical health needs. We'll also include investments in diversion funds, which my colleagues have referenced here earlier.

We are also working in partnership with our service providers who provide support at the local level - both in HRM and also right across the province - to ensure that they are stable, have the staff that they need, and can provide the services that are required.

Some recent steps that have been taken as well include education sessions for housing support workers so that they understand the changes that were made - for example, with regard to renovations in the Residential Tenancies Act, so that they can support individuals, including working with 211. The 211 service is a very important component in all of this work as well. Oftentimes individuals, while they may feel intimidated to pick up the phone and call the Department of Community Services, they are much more comfortable with contacting 211.

The individuals who provide that caring and compassionate response at the other end of the phone are really key in helping to connect individuals with programs that may be able to support them preventively, so - to echo some of the earlier comments made - if it's a challenge around utility arrears, connecting that individual with an organization that can help them cover those utility arrears. If it's rental arrears, working with them to connect them properly.

Certainly, for individuals who are clients currently being supported by the Department of Community Services, their caseworkers play a really pivotal role in helping prevent those individuals from becoming homeless. That relationship is a really pivotal

relationship in that clients reach out to their caseworkers, make them aware of challenges that they're experiencing. The caseworker can then bring other resources to bear, be they financial, be they accessing health services, whatever may be required to wrap around that individual or that family to keep them housed.

We have also opened conversation with the Investment Property Owners Association of Nova Scotia to talk to them about their role in helping to ensure that tenants who may have vulnerabilities are properly supported. They are a very open and willing partner. They want to know how best to support individuals who reside in the buildings that they own. We want to open a dialogue with them.

To the fundamental tenet of your question - if you're housed, remaining housed is the best possible situation for families and individuals to be in. That's absolutely our goal. Once an individual becomes homeless, it's much more challenging, particularly in a market where the availability of affordable housing is stretched.

If we can help individuals maintain the housing that they have by leveraging all of the partnerships that exist, that's the ideal situation for everyone. I know I rhymed off a whole bunch of things there, but prevention is critical in all of this work. We are deeply engaged in building models that will allow us to be much more responsive as early as possible and move from a crisis-driven system.

THE CHAIR: MLA Duale for a quick follow-up. We have roughly 15 minutes left for our questioning.

ALI DUALE: I'm just going to follow-up to my previous question, and also, I'd like to hear it from the Chair, the same question that pertains to my previous question.

All these program that you have mentioned, and also the Chair has made a very interesting comment in regard to people not knowing what was available for them. When they find out, it's too little too late.

My follow-up question is: All these programs and initiatives, how much are people aware and what kinds of outreach programs are in place so that people know these programs and services are available before something happens?

Also, I'd just like to ask the Chair: Is there anything that we as a province can learn from the rest of Canada about what's happening in terms of prevention, in terms of reaction? I'd like to hear that also because, as you said earlier, it's not only one department or one government. We, as a collective, would like to learn what's happening in the rest of the country. Thank you, both of you.

TRACEY TAWHEEL: Thank you very much for that question. Absolutely, we have challenges in terms of awareness of the programs that are available.

[10:30 a.m.]

We work in partnership with our service providers to try to spread the word at the local level, certainly with regard to changes made to the Tenancy Act that I referenced. The Department of Service Nova Scotia and Internal Services has embarked on a marketing campaign. As recently as yesterday, they were on *Maritime Noon* talking about the changes to try to raise awareness. We've had education sessions with housing support workers to make sure that they are aware of all the programs that are available.

I think awareness is a challenge, and I would suggest as well, that there is a stigma attached to programs that are offered by the Department of Community Services. We recognize that. I would love to change that, but we recognize that.

Back to my earlier comments around trust and building relationship, it's a very significant step to take to reach into the Department of Community Services. We recognize that our partners here, as well as service providers, have a much greater chance of building a relationship and having an open dialogue with individuals who may need help.

While the department provides a very significant suite of programs, we are viewed as only supporting, or being available to support, the absolute most vulnerable in the province when, in fact, I believe the programs that we offer could benefit a whole lot more people. Even if they ultimately don't receive service from us, we are in a position to connect them to other services and to really help them so that they don't, from a preventive perspective, end up on our caseload.

I think from an MLA perspective, you all are also in a very unique position where you are sometimes seeing people at their most vulnerable moment. I would ask you to think of us at those moments. Even if you're not aware if we have a program, reach out to your local office, reach out to me or Joy - we are always happy to help.

We'd love to be out of business eventually, but the programs and services that we offer and the people who deliver them are absolutely amazing. We want to help as many people as possible. If you can help us do that, please.

ERICA FLECK: MLA Duale, thank you for that. To echo the Deputy Minister's comments - you asked earlier if we communicate. I'll just go back to when I was full-time on the homelessness file for the HRM. At least 20 times a day, I think, Joy and I chatted - that was on a good day - and of course, reaching out to the other organizations as well,

To the deputy minister's point though, I just learned something new today - and I thought I knew a lot - so you know that gap in income assistance, made being available. Some of the notes I wrote down, but prevention and mitigation are always the pillars and as you know, Ali, you've heard my mantra many times, and so that is the key to making life better for everybody.

There's still a gap that exists in what is available across all organizations. I know Joy and I discussed this at the very beginning - or I say the very beginning for me - last Fall when I was put on this file. The gaps in the system are simply that we don't know what each of us are doing. To Debbie's point earlier, sometimes we step on toes because we're all trying to work on the same thing with the same individual.

If we could fix one thing, that would be my recommendation. I don't even have the right words, but basically, we're all working in silos sometimes and we just need to kind of collectively put our heads back together to have that continued, open dialogue.

To echo the deputy minister's comments on 211 there - and I still talk to 211, and of course 311. They do share a space, so all of that information is shared, if people call the wrong number - if they call 311 instead of 211, or vice versa. The staff there are amazing, and do get that word out. As she mentioned, it's sometimes easier to make that kind of anonymous phone call to some stranger on the end of a 211 call or a 311, rather than calling the Department of Community Services because, as she said, there is that stigma attached. Yet we still have gaps. I think that would be my recommendation, so thank you for that.

THE CHAIR: MLA MacDonald.

JOHN A. MACDONALD: This is going to be to Ms. Fleck. I would say that from your opening remarks - since you were saying you were put in the role in September - for what you did for that one vet, I guess they put the right person in the role. My point is from that in a short time - because it's around the time we got elected - what have you seen on a trend? Is it up or down for homeless vets? Is it always going to be a roller coaster? If you can give me some idea on that, that would be great.

ERICA FLECK; Thank you very much for that question. I have personally seen an increase. It goes back to - I think it was initially MLA Taggart's question initially - about the rural. What I've seen is that people in the rural areas - and I think Ms. Lowther spoke to this - are coming into the bigger cities, so to speak, the bigger core areas. This puts further strains on the HRM particularly, but I know in speaking to my counterparts in Cape Breton that they have the same issues.

I speak to my counterparts across Canada at least once a month. Every large city in Canada has the exact same issues, and there is nothing new.

To one of the other questions earlier - do we talk? I talk to my counterparts every month at a minimum. We specifically talk about homelessness - how they're dealing with it. Toronto has shared all their documents - as have other major cities - with the HRM and back and forth.

The numbers are increasing, but again, that's in part due to the pandemic, because people have lost jobs that they had transitioned to, again not knowing the supports and

some of them that may be available. Again, from a federal perspective, the process and things have gotten better, as we've all mentioned. Again, that average for receiving your first pension cheque is four to six weeks, but there have been cases - and it's not abnormal - of waiting a year for your first cheque. That continues to be an issue.

You can imagine going a year with no money whatsoever, after having worked your entire life - generally from teenage years to your senior years - and then you sometimes wait a year for your first cheque. That's not going to be fixed. There are always going to be issues. Again, people don't know what services are available.

As a vet who transitioned to a somewhat civilian life - still wearing the uniform - it's hard, it's frustrating, it's scary, challenging. I'm a lucky one. I'm one of the very luckiest ones, but there are a lot of people out there who are not so lucky.

SUZY HANSEN: I know who I'm going to be directing this to. This is to Ms. Fleck over there. Early on the morning of August 18th, Halifax Police began to remove tents put up by people living in Halifax parks at Horseshoe Island, Peace and Friendship Park, and the Common. They also removed tents and temporary wooden shelters at the old Central Library grounds.

Since the end of August, there's been an encampment at the park on the corner of Chebucto Road and Dublin Street in Halifax. The park and its residents have been subjected to ongoing scrutiny from Halifax Police - most recently dismantling food structures on cold Saturday nights.

My question is: Based on your training and experience working with vulnerable unhoused people, has the police response to temporary crisis shelters and other encampments been reasonable or productive? What would an appropriate response look like?

ERICA FLECK: What a lovely question. Just to clarify, I was not part of the project in August when anything happened. I came on board in September as a result of, obviously, some of those actions.

Unfortunately, what people in the general public don't see is - I don't want to say behind the scenes, because it's very open in a park, but specifically to Meagher Park, which is at the corner of Chebucto Road and Dublin Street. There have been - and I've personally been witness to many of them - fist fights, assaults, drugs standing on the street, a lot of altercations between the residents at that particular park.

I have been a witness to the residents in that park screaming at the neighbours who bought houses in that community, cursing and swearing at them, threatening them. There are people in their homes there who are afraid to leave their houses. There are people who have had bikes stolen from their property, fences smashed, windows smashed, property

damage. Numerous residents whom I spoke to in that community specifically got security cameras on their doorstep, so now they just tape people stealing all the things off their step.

It is a continuous barrage. I'm not saying everything that the police do is perfect. I don't think anybody in this room is perfect, but what the public fails to understand is the amount of friction that goes on every single day, and the threats to the community and the people who bought houses there. They also deserve a safe existence where they paid money to go.

When police are called, they are called because there are ongoing issues there - again, alcohol, drugs, fights. It's constant. The neighbours tape them. They send it in. It's very frustrating for all parties, even just people walking by. I've heard hundreds of stories from the neighbours and meeting with them there, and just general people who have to walk by there. They don't want to walk by there.

There's a school very close to there, as you know. The school is very concerned. We have the Mainline Needle Exchange going in every day to do needle sweeps. We started off with one. We had to increase it to three. They couldn't keep up with the demand. Children have found knives in the schoolyard, needles, and other sharp objects that were contaminants - and the list goes on.

The police didn't rip down a food shelter. Again, they're trying to put up fixed shelters in an area where a by-law exists that no shelter should be. They're not up to code - and that's at the end of the day. Whether it's advocates or residents who try to build more permanent structures, HRM's concern is always that they are unsafe. We did have somebody burn to death in the Bayers Lake area with one of those. There have been fires in other ones. Luckily, nobody was injured or perished, but it is a huge safety concern because of those issues. I hope that answers your question.

THE CHAIR: In the interest of time, and to offer you a short closing statement, and some committee business we have to attend to, I think that we'll wrap up our question period for this time. If I may ask - who would like to give a closing statement? We can begin with Ms. Taweel.

TRACEY TAWHEEL: I'll be very brief, just to say thank you very much for the invitation to be here today. As Ms. Fleck referenced, I have learned some things here today as well, which is wonderful. I've made a bunch of notes, so you'll be hearing from us.

I just want to say thank you for your questions. Your care and concern for this issue is very clear. Thank you very much for the opportunity to be here today. My door is always open, and my phone is always on, if there are any follow-up questions you have.

THE CHAIR: Ms. Fleck, would you like to give a closing statement?

ERICA FLECK: Yes. Again, I'll be very quick. First of all, Mr. Chair and committee, thank you so much for including me as a witness today. It's obviously a matter very dear to my heart. I know the Legion knows. I sit on other committees specific to veterans, so it's the thing that I'm very passionate about. Again, as a transitioning member, I don't think people understand how truly difficult it is mentally, physically, emotionally - across the gamut. I truly thank you.

In closing, I just want to say that everybody here, and so many organizations, do great work, but the biggest gap is always in communication. Again, I learned something new here today. Unfortunately, there's no one system, no little cheat card that says, "Call this place in the event of an emergency or break glass." So overall, if we could fix one thing from all levels of government and organizations, it would be to try to have something that was static to say, "This is what everybody does."

THE CHAIR: Ms. Lowther.

DEBBIE LOWTHER: I would also like to say thank you for the opportunity to be here. As we talked about earlier, it's great to know what everybody is doing, as we do all have to work together and collaborate.

For yourselves, I just want to let you know that we do often take phone calls from Members of Parliament's offices. They have somebody sitting in their office who is in crisis, and they will call us at that point in time and we can have a volunteer or somebody there. If you're ever in that situation, please reach out to us.

THE CHAIR: Thank you, Ms. Lowther. Ms. Mitchell-Veinotte.

VALERIE MITCHELL-VEINOTTE: Thank you once again for the opportunity to join you. Thank you once again for your dedication and your commitment to the care of veterans and their families within the province of Nova Scotia. Once again, I provide you with an invitation to contact me should you ever have a veteran in need or their families, or if you wish to discuss any issue surrounding the welfare of veterans and their families.

THE CHAIR: Mr. George, would you like to give a closing statement?

KEN GEORGE: As a veteran, I just want to thank everybody here for all the very hard work and dedication you're giving to the veterans of this province and this country. Thank you all very much. That's from the heart.

THE CHAIR: And for you and Ms. Fleck, who have worn the uniform, we thank you for everything you've done for our country. Thank you very much.

I think I speak for all of us that it was a very informative session. I think we all took notes. We all know what we have to do. We all have some good responsibility here.

That concludes our time with you now. Our committee will move on to committee business. We'll give you a few minutes to leave. Thank you very much.

We will recess until 10:47 a.m.

[10:44 a.m. The committee recessed.]

[10:47 a.m. The committee reconvened.]

THE CHAIR: Order. If we could carry on our committee business. Hopefully, there's not too much that we have to deal with. It's now 10:47 a.m., and there's a bit of committee business that we do have to attend to.

First on our list was a response from Minister MacAulay from a motion that was put forth in the January 18th meeting for some information on transition and different things in the peer support groups. As per the request that was made, the minister did send us back a letter.

We've all had a chance to see that. Is there any discussion on that or can we just table that it's been received? Okay, that is tabled.

The next item was a request to appear from a group called the Last Post Fund. I'm assuming you've all received that as well. Any discussion about that? MLA Taggart.

TOM TAGGART: The Last Post Fund is a great organization, I believe. I want to be consistent on this, as I have been at other committees. I think that we should receive this letter, discuss it, and consider it when we do our agenda-setting session for the next half-year. I don't know what the correct way to phrase that is. I think it's something that we should maybe consider when we set our agenda this Fall. I would be prepared to make a motion to that effect.

THE CHAIR: I'm not sure that we need a motion if we have agreement that we would move it forward to our topic agenda-setting meeting. Thank you, MLA Taggart, for that. That topic-choosing session was going to be at the end of our next meeting in June, as per our last meeting that we did. If we're all good with that, we'll add that to our topic list for discussion at that point.

Other than that, there's no other committee business on our agenda. Is there any other business? No other business being heard, I call for adjournment.

The meeting is adjourned. Thank you.

[The committee adjourned at 10:50 a.m.]