



House of Commons
CANADA

Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills and Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities

HUMA • NUMBER 020 • 2nd SESSION • 40th PARLIAMENT

EVIDENCE

Monday, May 11, 2009

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Chair

Mr. Dean Allison

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• (0905)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Dean Allison (Niagara West—Glanbrook, CPC)): I'd like to welcome everybody. Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2), we're going to continue our study of the federal contribution to reducing poverty in Canada.

Here we are at our first meeting on the road, in Halifax. I want to thank all our witnesses for being here today. We're looking forward to hearing what you have to say. I also want to welcome to the committee Megan Leslie, who doesn't need welcoming to Halifax, and the rest of my colleagues who are here today.

We're going to get started. I believe you each have a five-minute opening statement, and then we'll just go around. We have an hour and a half, so we have lots of time to ask questions. If your opening statement happens to be a little bit more than five minutes, I think we'll be okay with that.

We'll start with Andrew Waugh, who is here from Nova Scotia Legal Aid.

Welcome, and the floor is yours.

Mr. Andrew Waugh (Barrister and Solicitor, Nova Scotia Legal Aid): Thank you.

Good morning, honourable members.

I would like to take this opportunity to speak to you about poverty as a human rights violation and about concrete actions the federal government can undertake to ensure that Canada complies with its international human rights obligations and ceases to violate the rights of some of its most vulnerable and marginalized citizens.

As you are likely aware, Canada is a party to the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. It imposes fundamental legal obligations on Canada, including a duty to ensure that all citizens enjoy the right to social security, which includes the right to adequate social assistance and the right to an adequate standard of living. Currently Canada is in violation of both obligations.

For many years, the federal government reported to the United Nations that the conditions in the Canada Assistance Plan were the cornerstone of Canada's implementation of its obligations under the covenant to ensure that people living in poverty had an adequate standard of living. However, since the repeal of the Canada Assistance Plan in 1996 and its replacement by the Canada health

and social transfer, the United Nations has been very critical of the lack of conditions imposed by the federal government on its social transfers to the provinces.

The Canada health and social transfer imposes only one condition on the provinces with respect to social assistance: there can be no minimum residency period as a prerequisite to eligibility for social assistance. Otherwise, the provinces are free to establish whatever type of social assistance scheme they wish, including those that violate rights contained in the covenant. This stands in stark contrast to the conditions the federal government imposes upon the provinces with respect to the health transfers via the Canada Health Act.

In 1998, the United Nations Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights criticized the government for its hypocrisy in ensuring basic human rights by attaching standards to health care, while at the same time stripping away basic rights to social assistance. At that time, the committee wrote that Canada

did, however, retain national standards in relation to health, thus denying provincial "flexibility" in one area, while insisting upon it in others. The delegation provided no explanation for this inconsistency. The Committee regrets that, by according virtually unfettered discretion to provincial governments in relation to social rights, the Government of Canada has created a situation in which Covenant standards can be undermined and effective accountability has been radically reduced.

In 1998, the committee also specifically recommended that Canada consider re-establishing a national program, with specific cash transfers for social assistance and social services, that would include universal entitlements and national standards.

In its most recent review of Canada's compliance with its covenant obligations in 2006, the committee once again expressed concern that federal transfers for social assistance and social services to provinces and territories do not include standards in relation to some of the rights set forth in the covenant, including the right to social security. The committee also urged the state parties to establish social assistance at levels that ensure the realization of an adequate standard of living for all.

It is clear what Canada must do to fulfill its legal obligations under the covenant. Covenant standards must be adopted with respect to social transfers to the provinces.

Subsection 36(1) of the Constitution Act, 1982, created a constitutional commitment jointly on the provinces and the Government of Canada to provide, *inter alia*, essential public services of reasonable quality to all Canadians. Accordingly, subsection 36(1) can readily be seen as both a constitutional source of and a vehicle for the government to establish covenant standards with respect to its social transfers to the provinces.

Finally, it is important to keep in mind that the standards being discussed would not be national standards dictated by Ottawa, but would be international standards contained in the covenant ratified by 160 countries. The standards would reflect shared worldwide values rather than those having their origins in Ottawa.

There is no excuse, in a country like Canada, which prides itself on respecting human rights, both domestically and internationally, for these rights violations to continue unchecked. The current economic downturn means that more and more Canadians will be forced to rely on social assistance. They will endure further indignities due to the inadequacy of social assistance rates across the country.

Canada's next review of its covenant obligations before the UN committee is in June 2010. It is my sincere hope that at that time, Canada will be able to tell the committee of its success in living up to its covenant obligations, which are owed to all Canadians.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Waugh.

We'll continue right along. Ms. Ross, you have five minutes.

Ms. Rene Ross (Executive Director, Stepping Stone Association, Community Coalition to End Poverty in Nova Scotia): Thank you.

The Community Coalition to End Poverty in Nova Scotia was officially formed in 2007 with the goal of a collaborative, comprehensive, and effective poverty reduction strategy for Nova Scotia that would loosen the undeniable grasp that poverty has on the livelihood of all Nova Scotians by providing immediate, intermediate, and long-term sustainable change. The coalition includes non-government organizations and individual advocates working to end poverty and create equality. On October 17, 2007, on the international day for the eradication of poverty, CCEP Nova Scotia—as we are now known—launched the framework for a poverty reduction strategy for Nova Scotia.

We anticipate that throughout your travels and work studying poverty, this will be thematic. You will hear about the widening gap between the rich and the poor, the choice between heat and eat, and the challenges in our rural areas versus the challenges in our urban cores. You will hear about malnourishment, slumlords, addictions, child apprehensions, lost jobs, the lack of affordable housing, and the mother who cannot go to work because she has no child care. You will hear about poverty.

The federal government should not rest contently in looking for ways to contribute to the elimination of poverty. Rather, we must all accept that the federal government is a critical cornerstone in the collaborative elimination of poverty. It is time for the provincial and

federal governments to stop sloshing the duty of responsibility onto the other when both have an equally crucial role to play.

Current income assistance rates in Nova Scotia hold individuals and their families well below the poverty line. Income assistance rates in Canada are abhorrent. Nova Scotians are struggling with utility bills. They are struggling to provide the nutrition they know their children require. They are struggling to keep their homes warm enough to be livable. They are struggling with their health as poverty creates emotional, psychological, and physical stressors. Tens of thousands of Nova Scotians are struggling for basic survival today, in Canada, in 2009. We all know there are many in this province who are more vulnerable to poverty due to factors such as gender, age, race, skin colour, ability, sexual orientation, criminalization, socio-economic class, and geographic location within the province, as well as status as a migrant indigenous person or refugee. The factors that pull more women than men into poverty are rooted in gender bias and discrimination against women. This is illustrated through the reliance on income assistance, child and family responsibilities, and the earning gap amongst women, to name but a few.

For single mothers, their primary responsibility of raising a family presents significant challenges to furthering their education and to securing meaningful employment. We must continue to remind ourselves that poverty is policy-created, created by an era of poor-bashing, disempowerment, and discrimination. People who live in poverty feel as if they themselves are being blamed by society for their poverty. They are being judged as lazy, immoral, and incompetent and are consistent targets of suspicion of fraudulent and criminal activity. People believe that going out and getting a job is the solution to their problems, that this is easy to do, and that those who do not do this are simply lacking the energy and motivation.

Policies such as strict welfare-to-work mandates and invasive monitoring both reinforce and are reinforced by such perceptions. It is a sad state of affairs in our province when our job as advocates of relaying the causes and consequences of poverty becomes easier because those who never dreamed they would be faced with these insurmountable challenges soon will be.

Honourable members, it would be impossible for a group such as CCEP to ignore the elephant in our room today. For a group that was founded with the intent of creating a poverty reduction strategy for the province, it may appear our work here is done. After years of lobbying, holding marches, going to ministerial meetings, hosting community workshops, and then waiting for nine months of no follow-up from the government to community about the status of the poverty reduction strategy, mere weeks before an anticipated election call the provincial government has told us that now we have a poverty reduction strategy.

Now we, as advocates, are trying to determine where the federal funds are coming from, which money is old and which money is new. There are a few targets in this strategy but no benchmarks. We are trying to determine what the role of the Canadian government will be in all of this. Will it be on board? To be honest with you, criticizing something that we have lobbied for, for so long is not easy. It's as if you asked someone for a piece of cake and they passed you a bowl of flour. It's a start, but you do not have the other ingredients, you don't know when and if they are coming, and you don't want to give the flour back because who knows if you will get it next time and if and when that next time will be.

Honourable members, here are the recommendations from CCEP, who work with and represent people living in poverty. This is what we need from you. We would also like you to review our recommendations in more detail from the framework that was provided to the clerk.

● (0910)

We want the provision of universal access and better funding and coordination of policies, programs, and services.

We would like you to create, foster, and sustain social policies and programs to enable families and individuals to meet their basic needs and empower them to participate fully in society.

We would like to entitle all residents to a livable income, decent working conditions, and employment benefits.

End the broken promise that is child poverty. Establish a comprehensive, accessible, coordinated early childhood development strategy.

Help us to become a better educated population. Help us, the advocates, the front-line organizations who are working on the front lines of poverty and the community, to communicate the true causes and consequences of poverty.

And just to follow up, it was very challenging to do this presentation, a five-minute brief for you today, simply for the reason that we know you've heard it all before. We know you've heard all the stories. We know that in your jobs as members you understand what is really going on. Unfortunately, these stories and these realities don't seem enough for action from provincial or federal governments, and we would like you to act.

Thank you very much for your time.

● (0915)

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Ross.

I'm just wondering, for the benefit of the members who are not from Halifax, if you could tell us a bit about the Stepping Stone Association and what you guys do.

Ms. Rene Ross: Stepping Stone is a not-for-profit organization that provides support to the street-based sex workers in Halifax. We are almost 20 years old.

We work from a harm reduction model, and we are the only organization of our kind in Atlantic Canada. We work with approximately 115 former and current sex workers per month, and we were founded following the murders of three street-based sex workers 22 years ago. Their murders remain unsolved today.

The Chair: Thank you very much for the hard work you do.

Not to minimize what you said earlier, but I would venture to say that not all members of Parliament know this issue as well as you'd probably hope they do. While much has been discussed over the years, I think there was an article in *Maclean's* indicating that almost two-thirds of members of Parliament have been here less than five years. So I appreciate the fact that you're probably frustrated with this message, but I can assure you that it's an important message to continue to get out and to continue to educate people about.

I realize some members know a lot more. Our good friend, Mr. Martin, who encouraged the study, has been a champion for poverty for many years, and it was his encouragement to the rest of this committee that made us decide we should do this.

I appreciate your patience and hard work, but I would say that education continues to be an issue that we need to work on all round. I appreciate your being here to work on the rest of us who need a little more information on this. So thanks, Mr. Ross, for being here. We look forward to the question and answers portion.

Ms. Rene Ross: Thank you very much. I would also like to extend our gratitude to Tony for helping to do this.

It is our hope that with this increased education comes collaboration amongst non-profit groups, community agencies, and those working in government, because it is our shared duty to relay the causes and consequences of poverty to Canadians.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Ross.

Now we are going to move to Claudia Jahn. You are from Community Action on Homelessness. If you could talk a bit about what your organization does before you get into your presentation, that would be great.

Mrs. Claudia Jahn (Program Director, Community Action on Homelessness): Certainly. First I would like to echo Rene's comment by thanking you for being here. There's a lot of criticism sometimes that so many reports have been written about poverty and not much action follows. I actually appreciate every standing committee coming to Halifax, because it is sometimes important to talk about an issue again and again, and I see that we are making some inroads. The subject of poverty is all of a sudden on every agenda. If you look to the United States, you see that all of a sudden mayors and politicians are being elected on the basis of their poverty and homelessness agendas. This is a huge success. I really would like to thank each one of you for coming here.

My name is Claudia Jahn. I'm the program director of Community Action on Homelessness here in Halifax. We administer and share a delivery model with Service Canada, the homelessness partnering strategy.

You are here to examine the federal contribution on poverty in the country. I can speak for my area of expertise, which is homelessness and the homelessness partnering strategy, which is actually working very well. I must say there are lots of compliments for this program. For the last ten years it has been not only the only program in the country that addresses specifically homelessness, but it is distributed in consultation with the community and it's praised for its innovative model.

Behind every successful program are people. The people in Ottawa and here at the local level, all Service Canada representatives, are working very hard to keep this program alive and to keep it going. Everybody knows that to make it successful, time is of the essence. Everybody knows that individuals are affected by this program. That is why everybody feels very passionate and is working hard to make it work.

There are some points of criticism in regard to the program. One of them is the short-term nature of it, which makes strategic planning impossible. Here in Halifax we cannot plan for the next two years. Since the province is not at the table with us in regard to homelessness, it is impossible for a non-profit organization to plan for the future.

The existing provincial bilateral affordable rental agreement doesn't go deep enough to really address the needs of the most vulnerable population, the people who are depending on social assistance or low-income wages. The provincial program is intended for market rents, which are not attainable for the population we are talking about. It's crucial for us that the federal government stay involved and take the leadership on the homelessness issue.

I'm hoping the federal government can lead the negotiation with the province and encourage all the partners to come on board and solve this problem in partnership. Moreover, our organization looks into the needs of the people living in shelters, which we have currently done by interviewing 158 individuals in the shelter and service system. We identified that there are so many needs that it's really a complex need, and other departments have to come on board. It is not only the Department of Community Services that has to address the issue, but the Departments of Health, Justice, and other sectors as well.

As Rene stated before, poverty is created and maintained by policy and by programs. We see certainly that different areas are affected. Adequate income, adequate housing, and adequate support: these are for us the solution to addressing homelessness on a national level. For my area, for Community Action on Homelessness, it is therefore important to create suitable housing for everyone in need here in the city, providing support systems.

• (0920)

Probably 85% of individuals living in the shelter system suffer from mental health issues. So there is a high need for support services and different degrees of support services.

Coming back to the homelessness partnering strategy, I would like to add, as I mentioned before, that the short-term nature of the program has to be looked at. The allocated funds are certainly not enough. We received just over \$3 million over two years. It has been the same amount for the last 10 years. And the administrative burden

on the non-profits to apply to and report on this program are just too high.

Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you.

Before we get started again, Andrew, I would note that I had asked everyone else to explain what they do, and I think I understand what legal aid is, but why don't you talk a bit about what you're involved with.

Mr. Andrew Waugh: I practise in the area of poverty law, which is sometimes difficult to describe. I guess I'll basically describe the areas of work I generally am involved in. I represent people with respect to social assistance, residential tenancies, Canada Pension Plan appeals, and human rights complaints, and basically anything where people living in poverty come into contact with the justice system and don't fall under the regularly provided legal aid services in family and criminal law.

• (0925)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We're going to have a couple of rounds of questions. The first one will be seven minutes of questions and answers.

We're going to start with Mr. Savage. Apparently, you're close by as well, or you're from the area.

Mr. Michael Savage (Dartmouth—Cole Harbour, Lib.): First of all, I welcome committee members to Halifax, which is one of the largest suburbs of Dartmouth here in Nova Scotia.

Voices: Oh, oh!

Mr. Michael Savage: Beautiful Halifax, Megan.

This is the first travel we've done on this committee, just to set the context. We started this study over a year ago and spent some time defining poverty and looking at market basket measures and LICO, and then we looked at what other countries have done. Some have had some good success. We also looked at the provinces who have had anti-poverty strategies in place for some time, notably Quebec, Newfoundland and Labrador, and now Ontario, and most recently, of course, Nova Scotia, which has introduced an anti-poverty strategy, as I think Rene mentioned. So we've done that.

We didn't have any meetings from June until about February, because of the election and all of the fun and games in Parliament after the election and just before Christmas. We've picked it back up and decided to travel. This is the first meeting we're having here in Halifax.

I appreciate that you've come out. I know that you've spoken before. I know Claudia has spoken to a Senate committee on anti-poverty. She's appeared before another Senate committee with Catherine Callbeck, I think. I've certainly been to lots of forums where I've heard a combination of you speaking on this issue. So I know there is a certain sense of fatigue from people who have been dealing with this for a long time.

But I'm very pleased, Claudia, to hear you say that it's good to talk about this. I think it is. I think I can say for this committee that there is a serious intent that we can produce a report that we would be proud of and that would say, these are the ways Canada can reduce poverty over the next few years—and then of course it's up to political will. But it's important that we put a stake in the ground, and that's what we're trying to do.

I referenced the anti-poverty strategy that was unveiled by the provincial government just in the last little while. I wonder if any of you have had a chance to have a look at it. Obviously it hasn't had a chance to work its way through in any way, but I wonder if any of you could give me your thoughts as to whether it's heading in the right direction, and if it is, what's good about it, and if it's not, what is not good about it.

Mrs. Claudia Jahn: I would like to comment on the affordable housing part. I'm also a member of the Affordable Housing Association of Nova Scotia.

We examined the Nova Scotia poverty reduction strategy with regard to affordable housing, and certainly it doesn't go far. It basically sounds as though it's just an introduction of existing programs, and as we all know, the existing programs are not really working, looking at the numbers. We produced the Community Action and Homelessness community report card on homelessness, so we have the numbers of existing affordable housing units in the province and how many were created over the last 10 years, and this surely indicates that it's not enough.

The poverty reduction strategy, in my opinion, is not a strategy. It doesn't have any targets. It doesn't have any money behind it. Even from other provinces charging the strategies.... There is already a lot of criticism coming out in the discussions I'm taking part in.

This is a ten-year plan. We should be really mindful that we are dealing with people and people's lives, and they cannot take ten years to solve a problem. At a conference in Calgary one author really got me thinking. We are doing all this work, and we were all happy to have a strategy, but we have to stop sometimes too. Are we doing the right thing, or are we just following a model from the States, which sounded so exciting—the ten-year plan to end homelessness, the ten-year plan to end poverty? Some of these things are like slavery. He said slavery wasn't ended by saying, “Okay, 25% of you stay on for a while, 10% I release this year, and in five years 25% more will be released, and it will be ended.” We have to make a decision ourselves. Do we want to end poverty? Then it has to end right now, not in ten years; it has to end now.

This is my criticism with the ten-year plan in general. Our poverty reduction strategy for Nova Scotia seems to me to be a cut-and-paste from existing programs. That's all it is, so it's really a piece of paper. As long as there is no passion and money behind it, if we want to end this, it's just hot air for me.

I feel strongly. Everything is, of course, money-related, but here in Halifax, for instance, we're looking at over 200 homeless people, while 1,200 individuals accepted the shelter system in the last year. Let's say 240 people are living in the shelter system. Shouldn't we be able to solve this problem and create 200 units of affordable supportive housing? We are able to do that. With a national housing strategy with the right money behind it, we would be able to solve this in two years.

We don't need ten years and we don't need a poverty reduction strategy. We should be more pragmatic. That's my opinion.

● (0930)

Mr. Michael Savage: First of all, I want to mention that Merlin Watt has joined us. He organized a small informal meeting last night that Tony and I were able to join. We had some people there who are living in poverty. We've had people who were working on it. It was very useful, so thank you for putting that on last night.

I want to talk about housing a little bit further, then, since we're going into that area, which everybody we've met with has identified. Mike Kirby from the Mental Health Commission indicated that as a priority, it would be number one. Number two would be that the social infrastructure in Canada is not designed for people with mental health issues, episodic-type illnesses. We heard from the Canadian Association for Community Living and the Canadian Paraplegic Association that housing is a key priority.

You all have some understanding of this and some expertise in this. I know I'm getting short on time and I'm sure we'll pick this up later, but let me ask you a specific question: if we're going to support housing, what is the federal government's role?

It needs to support housing, and the government has indicated \$1 billion for social housing, but it was very quick to say that this is not a long-term strategy, but a short-term one. It's a long-term need, obviously. Is it in construction of housing for people who have specific challenges, whether mental health issues or addictions? I was going to ask about the role of subsidies for existing housing for people to get into, but rather than go over my time right away, maybe I'll come back to that, Chair, and somebody else may pick up on that.

Thank you.

The Chair: Madame Beaudin, you have seven minutes.

[Translation]

Mrs. Josée Beaudin (Saint-Lambert, BQ): Thank you very much and thank you for being here today.

Ms. Ross, you talked a lot about non-profit organizations and local initiatives which are very important to reduce poverty. In what ways could the federal government help these non-profit organizations who work on the front lines? I come from Quebec. You may already know that in Quebec there is a parent act respecting antipoverty.

I really have two questions. This parent act represented an exceptional mobilization of the civil society; it was a partnership. I have a question about the help the federal government can give to non-profit organizations but also on the issue of your antipoverty strategy. Have you been involved, as a local partner, with this strategy? Were you contacted? Do you wish to be involved to define, as you were saying, more precise targets? Has the civil society been involved from the start in the drafting of this strategy?

[English]

Ms. Rene Ross: Thank you very much for your question. Welcome to Nova Scotia.

The Community Coalition to End Poverty in Nova Scotia actually represents a multitude of groups, organizations, health boards, the Dalhousie Legal Aid Service, and front-line service organizations. CCEP is a large group from across Nova Scotia.

Our framework for a poverty reduction strategy was developed in collaboration with them and their voices at the front lines with people living in poverty. That is one of the very important jobs we in the non-profit organizations do: ensure that their voices and their needs are at the forefront, because they know best how to improve their lives.

Our collaboration within the community is there and it is strong. When we talk about a framework for poverty reduction at the provincial and federal levels, we have spent years having marches, rallies, and workshops—long, three-day workshops. There have been countless hours of work by some advocates. We actually have five pages worth of recommendations for the federal government that have been clearly thought out, debated, and discussed for years.

There are a lot of immediate things the federal government can do. We need the federal government to increase its investment in the Canada social transfer. That is paramount.

We need a supportive housing policy that will promote housing retention and stability. We need to have available funds prioritized for non-profit-housing providers. These are just a few of the many things the federal government can do.

As I said, I am the executive director of a non-profit organization. We all work very closely together. In our organization, we see everything: addictions, mental health, family breakdown, violence, and crimes against the individuals we work to support. We support 115 people, the most marginalized in society, with a few staff and funding that has remained at the same level for 15 years. This is not just at our organization. This is for women's centres and transition houses. We need that kind of support to be better able to do our jobs. We also need the provincial and federal governments to step up and help to take responsibility for this, because over the years, we've continually felt that it is, "Go to the non-profits, go find a charity, go to the food banks." A lot of responsibility has come down on us, and we are just being weighted down and weighted down.

To go back to the poverty reduction strategy, the community has done this work, and has been doing this work for years, and has sat in countless meetings. Again, we really need to have the political will. We have studied at length Quebec and have looked towards that model. I will say that there are a lot of things in Quebec right now that we're a little envious of. Let's just say it that way.

Thank you for the question.

● (0935)

[Translation]

Mrs. Josée Beaudin: Do you want to add something, Ms. Jahn?

[English]

Mrs. Claudia Jahn: Yes. I would like to add something in regard to housing and homelessness. The federal contribution is helping here, of course, but what we need is a bigger investment. Demonstrated by the huge successes that these kinds of initiatives bring, led by the non-profits, it is just remarkable. We are just opening 20 units of supportive housing in a complex here in Halifax in the next couple of weeks, whereby individuals who are currently housed in the shelter system will move into these units and where we will have support for the upcoming years. If we could just have more of these, it would alleviate so much pressure on the system. It would just be remarkable.

We might be able to build housing like this every two years. We have five priorities in our community plan, including the construction of new development, renovation of very old housing stock, some money for programming, and a small margin for research. That's all we've had for two years, and we never knew if we would get it, which makes it really difficult.

So for me it's really an easy answer: we just need more money. The non-profit sector knows what they have to do very, very well, and they know what's needed, so we don't have to examine this any more. Working in a shelter, they know the needs of the shelter residents.

Thank you for your question.

The Chair: Thank you. That's all the time we have now.

We're going to move to Ms. Leslie.

Welcome again. You have seven minutes.

Ms. Megan Leslie (Halifax, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair, for the warm welcome, since I don't normally sit on this committee.

I'd like to extend official greetings and welcome all of you today to the riding of Halifax.

Thanks to the committee for coming here today.

Welcome to Mike, who is in the riding with the best view in all of Canada: a view of Halifax.

Voices: Oh, oh!

• (0940)

Mr. Michael Savage: No, no, the view from Halifax is Dartmouth.

Ms. Megan Leslie: Thank you to the witnesses for appearing today.

Just so the committee understands my relationship with the witnesses, I've done quite a bit of anti-poverty work with all three of them. Andrew and I worked together on a charter challenge based on poverty, and Rene, Claudia, and I have worked on the Community Coalition to End Poverty and other initiatives as well.

My first question is for Andrew. I'm thinking about the international covenant on social and economic rights and the fact that it says we have a right to an adequate standard of living. I'm thinking as well about the fact that in Canada we don't have a poverty line, that it's a bit of a myth. Folks think the low-income cut-off is the poverty line, but it hasn't been accepted by the Canadian government as a poverty line. We also have the market basket measure, but again, this is not accepted, so there is no official poverty line.

I'm wondering how that plays into the fact that we have to define "adequate". How would we define "adequate"?

Mr. Andrew Waugh: That's an excellent point. It's one the committee has mentioned several times, both in 1998 and most recently in 2006, and it has sort of called Canada to task for not having.

Ms. Megan Leslie: When you say the committee...

Mr. Andrew Waugh: I'm sorry. It's the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. That's the committee that parties to the covenant report to with respect to their obligations in fulfilling their duties pursuant to the covenant.

Most recently, in 2006, during Canada's last reporting period, the committee was specifically critical of that point you raise with respect to the fact that Canada has no official poverty line. The committee once again recommended that Canada should establish one.

As you point out, it becomes very difficult for anyone to assess the adequacy of social assistance when you have nothing to assess it against. Currently, as I know you're aware, the National Council of Welfare publishes its welfare incomes report, and I know it always uses LICOs to measure the depth of poverty that people on social assistance are in; that's basically the distance between the low-income cut-off line and the level of social assistance that's offered.

So certainly there are organizations out there assessing the adequacy, but whether or not the federal government can do that is a bit of a mystery, because, as I said, they don't have an official poverty line. So in order to establish standards with respect to social transfers around social assistance, I think Canada's adoption of a national poverty line would be a first step in being able to determine the adequacy of social assistance as offered by the provinces.

Ms. Megan Leslie: Great. Thank you.

I think part of what Madam Beaudin's question was getting at was that we need solutions, so what are some solutions? I think establishing a poverty line is a good first step.

Continuing with solutions, I'd like to ask you a question about jurisdictional issues. When you talked about dedicated funding with strings attached, modelled after the Canada Health Act, that really resonated with me, because that's actually why I decided to run for federal politics. I was hoping you could elaborate a little on the lack of conditions right now for federal transfers and the real need for those conditions.

Mr. Andrew Waugh: Sure.

The act that brought into effect the Canada health and social transfer basically said that the health transfers to provinces have to meet certain conditions that are contained in the Canada Health Act. If not, funding can be affected.

With respect to the social transfers, as I said in my presentation, there is nothing except the fact that a province can't have a minimum residency requirement as a prerequisite for eligibility and social assistance. That means if someone showed up in Nova Scotia tomorrow, they could instantly qualify for social assistance if they meet the eligibility criteria, even though they've just arrived in the province. That's the only current condition. Obviously, there's nothing there with respect to adequacy.

You mentioned the jurisdictional issue. As you know, provinces have certain jurisdictions and the feds have certain jurisdictions. The provinces are responsible for social assistance. The federal government can't swoop in and start designing social assistance programs in each of the provinces. But what they can do is use their spending power, which they've done with the Canada Health Act and our health care program, to effectively tell the provinces, we want to see X, Y, and Z when you establish a social assistance scheme. That's currently what they are not doing.

• (0945)

Ms. Megan Leslie: You mentioned that there is currently no condition that social assistance must be provided.

Mr. Andrew Waugh: No. Technically, a province could choose not to establish a social assistance program. That would probably not last for long. According to the legislation, that could occur.

Ms. Megan Leslie: Thanks.

To Claudia and Rene, I want to ask you about housing. The tent city in Toronto, which you probably know about, happened about 10 years ago. When folks were moved out of the tent city, most of them were given housing as part of a "housing first" option. I think about 80% of those folks are still housed, showing that it's not about addiction and it's not about mental health. We can actually keep people housed by putting them in housing. I know it's a bit radical.

I was hoping you could comment on the "housing first" model as a federal initiative.

Mrs. Claudia Jahn: It always feels like we have to laugh about it, right? Isn't it amazing? We move people out of tents into their house and they actually like it. Come on. Everybody in the shelter system could be housed. Nobody wants to be in a shelter system. Of course, it's absolutely possible. Probably 25% here in Halifax were just evicted, so it comes as a big shock and surprise to them. They could be housed again right away. Maybe we could have even prevented the eviction with some measures.

For the mental health clients, when I talk to each individual for one or two hours, you realize they shouldn't be there. If they had cancer or any other illness, they would be well taken care of. They belong in a hospital bed. They belong in a home. They cannot fend for themselves. We let the most vulnerable people really fend for themselves on the street. That's what we are currently doing. Every resident of a shelter can be housed tomorrow.

Ms. Rene Ross: Just to add to that, we see that on a regular basis. We have had a housing pilot program for just over a year. The funds came from Service Canada. One of the biggest challenges facing sex workers is the lack of housing. For sex workers, we get them into housing, and that's basic. We get them into housing, which we've been extremely successful in doing. I'd say that our success rate is 80%. But when we're not successful, that's due to the criminalization. Everybody asks why so many street-based sex workers are homeless. It's because they are criminalized. What happens is they get a house, maybe there's another charge that comes back, and they're off to jail for doing what they have to do to survive. Then they come out and their house is gone. That's the only difficulty we have in retention rates with the people we work with through the federal program. Then again, that's another thing we are lobbying for.

We've had an extremely high success rate. As Claudia said, we're actually surprised because it is that simple. The only challenges, aside from criminalization of people in poverty, is the discrimination that happens with some landlords—not all. It's also from society and other residents. Again, that just shows that we have more work to do as a whole with education.

The Chair: Thanks.

We're going to move over to Mr. Komarnicki. You have seven minutes, sir.

Mr. Ed Komarnicki (Souris—Moose Mountain, CPC): Thank you.

And thank you very much for your insightful presentation. I certainly appreciated hearing from you.

I know—and Claudia mentioned—that we know a significant amount about poverty. It's a question of money in part, and I'm sure it's the case that you could always have more federal dollars. I think it involves more than that. Currently, as you know, under the housing portion of it, we have \$2 billion over the next two years, and of course the homelessness strategy has been extended for five years at \$1.95 billion. Education is important, as is skills upgrading, and we have \$13.2 billion over two years. Of course, with respect to federal programs for families and children, there's somewhere in the range of \$13 billion, so there's a lot of money in the pot. You can always use more, but it seems to me that there's also a need for working through the collaborative maze that's required to say how you best

use what you have and maybe prevent provinces from clawing back. When federal governments put money in, provincial governments take it back—not all of them, but some of them, depending on their income support programs. So it seems to me it's more than just money, although that is always accepted. The question is whether you can put more in.

I know the federal-provincial-municipal jurisdictional issue is a big deal, and I want to talk about that a little bit, but I'll maybe start by talking to Andrew about the definition again. How would you define poverty, and how would you measure it so that we know what we're dealing with and how we're doing on a year-to-year basis? Maybe you can just address that, and then I'll talk a little bit about the jurisdictional side.

• (0950)

Mr. Andrew Waugh: With respect to how one measures this, I'm certainly not—

Mr. Ed Komarnicki: I'm asking you to define it.

Mr. Andrew Waugh: You want my definition. Okay, sure. I guess it's anyone who doesn't have the methods to meet their basic needs, where those basic needs would be adequate shelter, adequate food, and certainly clothing. I would also add education in there and the ability to meet their basic needs. That's certainly what the UN has said with respect to adequacies surrounding the right to social assistance contained in the covenants.

Mr. Ed Komarnicki: You are saying “the ability to meet a defined set of needs”, and when you say “the ability” what are you talking about there?

Mr. Andrew Waugh: That would simply mean the resources to meet those.

Mr. Ed Komarnicki: So you would make it a dollar figure per person or per family?

Mr. Andrew Waugh: Certainly there has to be a base level of money that is decided based on whatever measure of poverty we're using, whether it's the low-income cut-off, the market basket measure, or whatever Canada decides on. There needs to be an actual amount of resources that are made available to people, depending on where they live, to meet their basic needs.

Mr. Ed Komarnicki: How do you measure what that need level is? How do you define it? How do you measure it?

Mr. Andrew Waugh: I don't really feel as though I can necessarily speak to the measurement. That would be more for an economist or a statistician, but certainly LICOs are widely used, and I don't see any reason why that couldn't be adopted as a national poverty line, although I know there are critiques of that. As I said, I'm not really in the best position to comment on those.

Mr. Ed Komarnicki: Then I guess we have to look at the kinds of things that would figure into poverty. You have housing, which is a provincial issue. You may have health, mental health, or drug addiction; those are in sort of a provincial area of jurisdiction. Income assistance is in a provincial area of jurisdiction, so you have the problem of how you work through that to deliver an end product that is acceptable. And because it's a jurisdictional issue, many provinces are very concerned about federal encroachment in areas that are under their specific jurisdiction. I know Quebec, for instance, has its own method of dealing with those issues and delivering them, but how do you suppose that can be dealt with? Currently, it's mostly by federal-provincial agreements, and there are hundreds of them. We're not talking two or ten. We're talking 400 or 500 various agreements expiring at different times, so it's quite complex in that sense. How do you make it easier? What's your suggestion? You have a number of provinces and territories, each with different programs. How do you deal with that in the context of our country, which is a federal system?

Mr. Andrew Waugh: Certainly there are jurisdictional issues. I think it's ironic that the federal government has seen fit to establish conditions with respect to the health transfer. The federal government seems to have a few problems saying we want to see accessibility, portability, universality, the conditions—

Mr. Ed Komarnicki: When you actually look at the Canada Health Act, and in the five bases that you specify, they are very general in terms, and you don't see a lot of federal-provincial court battles as to how they're carrying it out. It's pretty loose in that sense, wouldn't you agree?

• (0955)

Mr. Andrew Waugh: Certainly, but I would contrast that with the social transfer, which imposes zero conditions, other than the one I mentioned, which is the prerequisite that there be no prerequisite for minimum residency requirements with respect to social assistance.

I do think there's a lack of federal will with respect to establishing conditions surrounding the social transfer on social assistance. With respect to the idea that provinces are going to be concerned with the federal government meddling with their jurisdiction, I think it's important to remember that the conditions I was speaking about are not conditions that Ottawa has just dreamed up and is then dictating to the provinces. These are conditions that 160 other countries have all said, "We're willing to adhere to these; these are rights that we all recognize as important, and these are obligations that we are going to try to live up to." These are worldwide shared values, and I don't think they're originating in Ottawa and then being delegated to the provinces.

Mr. Ed Komarnicki: Of course, Canada has its own peculiar provincial-federal legislation and jurisdiction. We talk about the Canada social transfer. In fact, it's been increasing every year, and it is scheduled to be increasing fairly significantly, but the question is, how do you direct the provinces to use that? So far a lot of the times for housing, for instance, you have housing agreements that go over multitudes of years and it's fine-tuning through negotiation. Isn't that what needs to happen, collaboration at a very intricate level?

Mr. Andrew Waugh: Absolutely. You're correct in saying obviously the social transfer is increasing, but again there's no guidance from the federal government as to what they expect the

provinces to provide with respect to social assistance gains. You can see that by the wide variance in the different schemes across the country. I can only speak specifically to Nova Scotia, but I can certainly tell you that social assistance rates here are manifestly inadequate, and there's no direction from the federal government with respect to what the province could be doing to ensure adequacy of social assistance rates here.

The Chair: Okay. Thank you very much.

We're now going to move to the second round, which will be five minutes for questions and answers.

Mr. Savage.

Mr. Michael Savage: Thank you, Chair.

At these committees we try not to get into partisan issues. This committee is pretty good at that. I usually save mine for late-night debates with Mr. Komarnicki in the House of Commons, and he gives as good as he gets.

I want to talk a little bit about the social transfer. Rene, I think you mentioned an increase.

Some of the organizations that have long been advocating for significant investments in social infrastructure organizations, like the CCPA, the Caledon Institute, and CCSD, have talked about the social transfer. Back in the 1990s the government of the day bundled the social transfer, health, and social services. We took health out back in 2004.

I think there's somebody here from the CCPA in the audience.

I think one of the things in the alternate budget was \$2 billion for investment in the social transfer—Nova Scotia, for example. Ed's right that we've been putting a little bit more money into the social transfer, but I don't think it's a matter of incrementally adjusting that. It's a matter of redoing it and making it significant. In Nova Scotia we've seen \$4-a-month increases in social assistance. What is that item? That doesn't make any difference. That's just an increase for the sake of saying it's an increase.

The other thing I wanted to say is there's a preference, and I'll leave it to you. We have great inequities in equalities province to province. Some provinces do much better in a lot of different things. But certainly on the social assistance side, the Province of Quebec has invested in providing more access of opportunity in a number of ways.

I'd like to ask you—perhaps, Rene, starting with you—to just expand a bit on the idea of an increase in the social transfer. It may be an unfair question. Do you have any sense of what it would take in Nova Scotia, for example? Do you have a specific number in mind? Or, more generally, how would we maximize the social transfer from the federal government to the provinces? That's what we're trying to do in this committee, to come up with recommendations for the federal government.

Ms. Rene Ross: When everything was split up and we became reliant on the Canadian social transfer, everything changed, and income assistance rates dropped. If we were to look back, things started to get worse and really take a sharp turn with the elimination of the health transfer and the Canada social transfer. We know that it needs to be increased significantly.

To be completely honest, it's been a couple of months since I've looked at the exact numbers for the CST. The provincial budget has just come out, we're in an election, and we don't really know what's going on. There have been a lot of updates and changes in what's going on with the federal and provincial governments and their agreement.

I want to go back to what Ed was saying earlier about measurements and what to do in jurisdictions, etc. I'm also the co-author of the Nova Scotia child poverty report card. We've been spending a lot of time debating what measurements to use. Should it be the LICO or the market basket measure? Should this be only for Nova Scotia or all of Canada?

I believe it's a combination of the LICO and the market basket. The market basket will be able to make it very provincially specific. Not only does poverty look very different here compared to Nunavut; it looks very different here compared to my home town of Springhill, Nova Scotia. There are many different challenges depending on where you live. For instance, shelter rates are not as high in my home town, but if you take sick, you'll need to find the money to go to the next hospital in Amherst that's going to be able to do anything for you. These are real challenges facing people living in poverty.

There needs to be some kind of measurement that's just not cut and dried for the entire country. We really need to look at challenges that are provincially specific. When we talk about transfers and the CST, we can't point the finger at the federal government and say they're not doing enough, and go to the provincial government and say they're not doing enough. As Ed said, we really need to collaborate and to stop wheeling and dealing with people living in poverty.

The CST needs to be increased. We need to have transfers from the federal government that will provide immediate relief. Bringing both of these to the table, trying our best to leave politics at home, and collaborating in a very positive way—keeping in mind the challenges provincially for each jurisdiction—are very important and key.

I don't have an exact number, but I do know that the CST needs serious and significant adjustment. It's one little sliver of the income we need to make changes for people living in poverty.

• (1000)

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Lobb, you have five minutes.

Mr. Ben Lobb (Huron—Bruce, CPC): Thank you.

In virtually every meeting we've had since this committee really started focusing on poverty, the underlying theme I've taken away is the need for affordable housing.

Claudia, you mentioned our most vulnerable and the housing you've provided for them. You mentioned the support side of it. On the housing you provide for those who are most vulnerable, what kind of support do you have? Is it built right into the actual housing facility, or how does that look?

Mrs. Claudia Jahn: I want to clarify first that Community Action on Homelessness doesn't provide direct services; we just administer the housing program. We work with all the service providers here in the city to develop appropriate programs. There's a variety of support services out there. For instance, the Y in Halifax have developed a very successful cost-efficient model. They rent units for women to occupy. They pay the first month's rent and provide three hours of support per week, which is minimum support. There are other models, like the one I mentioned earlier, which will open in a couple of weeks. There will be a full-time support worker on staff. Even the superintendents will have some expertise and will be able to support people if there is some crisis during the night.

There are different levels of support. Sometimes it's really a low level and sometimes it's a high level. For some clients it is one year at a low level. If you're dealing with mental health issues, a person can get into a crisis very quickly. We heard examples from non-profits. For instance, a relative dies and that puts someone into a crisis in a manic or suicidal mode. Then you might need high levels of support. We are talking about different degrees of support services.

• (1005)

Mr. Ben Lobb: Thank you.

To continue on that line, if you were looking at an ideal model for housing, is what you're describing the ideal concept and model to help people get off the street, deal with their issues and take that next step in their life? Is that the model your group would recommend?

Mrs. Claudia Jahn: I think we are now in a position to really frame what is needed since we've started with the homeless, and one former homeless person, Wayne MacNaughton, who is our co-chair on our committee, describes it best. He says what homeless people have in common is only that they are homeless. The rest is that they are individuals dealing with different problems.

So let's look at the numbers here. We looked at 158 individuals here in Halifax, and it's probably the same for other cities. Twenty-five per cent were just evicted. They didn't need any support services, they just needed eviction prevention measures. There are others. Over 60% have mental health issues. Light support systems could be fine for some. Some have very high support needs—this might be 10%. So we really have to look at the individuals to deal with it.

Fortunately, the non-profit sector knows what is needed and they can provide adequate services. We just have to enable them to deliver the programs.

Mr. Ben Lobb: Ms. Ross, you mentioned you are from a rural part of Nova Scotia, and I'm from a more rural part of Ontario. I just wondered if you could give the committee an idea of some of the options you provide for affordable housing in rural Nova Scotia—some that have worked.

Ms. Rene Ross: Again, there really needs to be more support in rural areas of Nova Scotia. The challenges are equally crucial and critical. Housing, yes, of course, that is an issue in rural Nova Scotia. So is transportation. There is no metro transit in the valley or in Cumberland County. There is a great program that is starting up a bus service right now, running from town to town.

Before I started working at Stepping Stone I worked at the women's centres for a year doing a project where I travelled across the province. I met with 95 women, from Cape Breton down to Yarmouth, about income assistance and ways they wanted to see the system transformed, based on their own realities and their recommendations.

I heard a lot of things in rural Nova Scotia. I heard about the complete lack of supportive programs. I heard about transportation issues. I heard about child care issues. This is also true for Halifax, but it's really severe in rural Nova Scotia. I heard about health care. Poverty encompasses everything. As I said earlier, if I were in Springhill and something happened, I would have to find my way to get transportation to the hospital when the ER is closed at home.

I would again go back to the approach that we need to look at the different challenges that the geography within our province presents, really keep in mind the challenges in the urban cores and the challenges in the rural cores. We need to come up with a strategy that is going to work for all Nova Scotians, because there are a lot of people in rural Nova Scotia right now who are living in poverty, and they feel isolated, secluded. I know women who, because of the strict welfare-to-work policies, are forced into work before they have adequate child care, and they are spending hours upon hours on a bus going from one town to the next town, and they hardly see their children anymore. So I do think all of these issues need to be addressed, especially for people living in poverty in rural areas in Nova Scotia.

•(1010)

The Chair: We'll now move back to Madame Beaudin for five minutes.

[Translation]

Mrs. Josée Beaudin: Thank you.

Before I was a member of Parliament, I worked for six years for the Centre 1,2,3 GO! in Quebec, that worked on the front lines for early childhood. There was practically never a day when I was not telling myself that if I had more resources I could have done much more.

Do you often tell yourself the same thing? If you had more resources, could you do more than what you are doing now?

[English]

Ms. Rene Ross: We tell each other a lot of things, on a daily basis, about what we could be doing. I think it's important in our line of work to reflect on the successes and all that we have been able to achieve. I will tell you that it's troubling, to say the least, when governments tell us we need to do a better job of balancing the budget. Really? We have 115 clients, a few staff, \$150,000 a year. The challenges are growing—not by the year, but by the week. We know that if we had more resources we could do more and we would do more. Right now we are maxing ourselves out, and it is critical that we have the support and political will of the federal government to help us to help everybody. We feel like somebody has taken us by the shoulders on the front lines and is just pushing down on us. The weight just keeps coming down. We're also spending more time running around filling out grants, instead of providing the programs and support that we're capable of. We're running around doing proposals, best practices, and evaluation plans. Of course we need to be accountable, and we are accountable. We're accountable to one another, and we believe that we should be accountable to the taxpayers of Canada—just as we believe the federal and provincial governments should be accountable. But we need to stop running around competing with everybody, filling out an application every other day. We're spending hours on applications for maybe \$3,000.

To answer your question, we know we could do more with those resources.

[Translation]

Mrs. Josée Beaudin: Nova Scotia just adopted an antipoverty strategy. There is one in Quebec and another one in Newfoundland-Labrador, under which provinces set-up very local partnership initiatives.

Do you think that the federal government should invest in those initiatives and grant them a permanent funding?

[English]

Mrs. Claudia Jahn: I would say yes, loud and clear. Our province is not showing leadership in addressing poverty, especially homelessness. The bilateral agreements are rolling out very slowly, as is the new stimulus package of \$128 million. This will fill some gaps and will be used for all the things that haven't been done since the national housing strategy was abolished in the nineties. There will be a lot of renovations. There will be affordable housing markets. But there isn't anything for the clients we are talking about—people on social assistance, low-income families, and people already in the shelter system. None of these funds will go deep enough to address this issue. All we are left with is the homelessness partnering strategy—just over \$3 million and unchanged for ten years.

We urge the federal government to stay involved, to be the leader, and to set the requirements and the standards for how these programs need to be rolled out. It's important to put a face to the issue. We deal with this on a day-to-day basis, and we have mothers telling us they're okay because they have a little kraft dinner in their cupboards. That's what I'm hearing, and it breaks my heart. I am here in Canada? It's not a question of more reports and talking. It's a question of whether we want to end it, whether we want to be different.

In Europe it's a philosophy. The government is responsible for all the citizens, for seeing that they are healthy, well nourished, and well housed. That comes first. Then we talk about technology, employment, all the other factors in our country. But if the foundation of your citizens is not taken care of, nothing in the country will work.

•(1015)

The Chair: Since we've come to the end of our time, I want to give you a couple of minutes, and then I want to give the NDP a couple. We're going to go beyond our time, but we're flexible on the road and we can do these kinds of things.

Mr. Ed Komarnicki: I just have a couple of points.

Without getting political, I know that in past years \$25 billion was taken from the Canada social transfer. Of course, infrastructure suffers, but most importantly, the most vulnerable would probably take the first hit when that happens. I know we talked about some increases to the Canada social transfer—particularly a 40% increase for post-secondary education, which is significant.

Having said all of that, the thing I get is that a lot of organizations spend a lot of time searching for grants, preparing grants. You see that those who are good grant preparers seem to succeed, and those who aren't, don't, perhaps to the same degree. What you find is a lot of energy going in that direction. Part of that is because we want to be accountable for tax dollars. But my sense is that maybe we've gone too far in a certain direction and we're causing groups who have been there for years and years, doing good work, to try to survive by going through various kinds of grants. When you look at the formulas and you look at the application forms, you almost have to hire somebody to do that.

So I hear you on that, and I don't like what I see, but the question is, how do you fix that? How do we deal with that? Let's forget about more money. It's how you allocate what we have appropriately and how you make it so that people know they're going to survive and can operate for years down the road and don't have to go through this continuous application process.

Do either one of you want to tackle that one? Suggestions? Concrete proposals?

Ms. Rene Ross: I haven't stopped writing grants long enough to think about that. All I can say is that when I looked and considered the recession and everything, it's just going to get a lot worse, because our donations from Nova Scotians are going to decline. They already have. They've already started to and they're going to continue to do so. As I said, these are very small pots of money that we're after, and we are completely and totally accountable for everything, because we spend just as much time writing grants and proposals as we do on the interim report and the final report and the

meeting and everything like that. As you said, in some cases, other non-profits will hire folks, or you rely upon volunteers, but—

Mr. Ed Komarnicki: The system is less than perfect. Do you have any suggestions as to how we can improve the system on a go-forward basis, or is that one of the necessary evils, so to speak, of continued existence?

•(1020)

Ms. Rene Ross: It's the nature of non-profit, but only to a certain extent. Again, I'm just seeing more and more over the past couple of years that people are spending a lot more time looking for those pots of money because there have been so many decreases from our core funding. That's both provincial and federal. So there's more time being put into that, because we want to keep our doors open and we want to continue those supportive programs and front-line services. I suppose if we weren't at the same level as we have been for ten years, with our core funding from the province, we wouldn't be doing this as much. Again, that goes back to larger things, like an increase in the CST and more collaboration between federal and provincial governments. So the bigger picture needs to be addressed.

The Chair: Thank you.

We're just going to wrap up.

Megan, why don't you just take a few minutes to wrap up?

Ms. Megan Leslie: Thank you.

I just have a couple of quick questions for Claudia, and I only really need a yes or no answer. I want to disabuse people of the idea that we actually don't have enough money for something like a poverty reduction strategy. I do believe that it's about political choices. So I have a very quick question for you. We lost \$6 billion by cutting the GST by 1%. Would \$6 billion help the housing situation in Canada?

Mrs. Claudia Jahn: It would solve it.

Ms. Megan Leslie: How about the \$250 billion in tax relief to big corporations? Instead we put it into a poverty reduction strategy.

Mrs. Claudia Jahn: It would be....

Ms. Megan Leslie: Thank you.

Rene, I want to ask you a quick question as well. You mentioned that some of the solutions are transportation, early childhood education, etc. When we worked on the poverty reduction strategy together locally we talked a lot about the need to break down the silos. It's not about the department of community services, it's not about the HUMA committee.

Actually, Mr. Lobb, I know I'm not testifying, but I'll just let you know that in Nova Scotia we actually have higher rates of rural poverty. You were asking a question about that. We actually have higher rates of low-income home ownership rurally in this province, which is a bit unique.

But with these silos in transportation, education, etc., do you think, Rene, that we need to have a look at the Criminal Code and look at how the Criminal Code criminalizes poverty? Would any poverty reduction strategy need to have a look at that legislation?

Ms. Rene Ross: Yes, we most certainly need to do that. The criminalization of poverty in Nova Scotia is something of great concern. There are new provincial acts and policies that are coming down extremely hard on panhandlers and squeegee kids, as has been evident in Vancouver.

I do the tax returns every year for our clients at Stepping Stone. A couple of months ago, I did a tax return for somebody who has not worked in the sex trade for a long, long, time—a number of years. She was actually getting a refund. We were so excited. It was my first refund in all my tax returns. It was clawed back. It was \$140. That was clawed back because of a prostitution fine she had from 10 years before.

I do tax returns for sex workers, current and former, where their total income for the year.... I did one two weeks ago, and her total income for the year was \$948. Sometimes people will say, "Oh, how can people go out and do that?", or "The things people do to survive." I could not imagine living on \$948.

There are some people who we work with for whom sleeping on the streets has become so unbearable that jail is a nice break for them. When I hear of people saying, "Fine, take me to jail because I need to get cleaned up because there are no detox beds; take me to jail because I'm tired of sleeping on the streets; put me in a cell for a couple of months because I need that break from my life and from my existence"—I think that is a pretty sad state of affairs. That's why it's a little bit quiet right now for us at Stepping Stone. It's not as busy as other months, not because the program users are doing well, but because a lot of them are in jail right now due to criminalization. Because of poverty, when they get out, the cycle starts all over again.

Thank you for your question, Megan.

The Chair: Once again, I want to thank our witnesses for being here today, not only for being here to talk to us, but also for the hard work you guys do at the front line. Thank you very much.

I'll adjourn the meeting. We'll be back again in about five minutes to start with the next panel.

Published under the authority of the Speaker of the House of Commons

Publié en conformité de l'autorité du Président de la Chambre des communes

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