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Chair: Mr. John Aldag



Standing Committee on Indigenous and Northern Affairs

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• (1100)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. John Aldag (Cloverdale—Langley City, Lib.)): Good morning, everyone. I call this meeting to order.

Welcome to meeting number 104 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Indigenous and Northern Affairs. We recognize that we are meeting on the unceded territory of the Algonquin and Anishinabe peoples.

Colleagues, before we start today, the House has introduced a new practice, which we've been asked to share with all members. This relates to avoiding audio feedback for our interpreters.

I'd like to remind all members and other meeting participants in the room of the following important preventative measures. To prevent disruptive and potentially harmful audio feedback incidents that can cause injuries, all in-person participants are reminded to keep their earpieces away from all microphones at all times.

As indicated in the communiqué from the Speaker to all members on Monday, April 29, the following measures have been taken to help prevent audio feedback incidents. All earpieces have been replaced with a model that greatly reduces the probability of audio feedback. The new earpieces are black in colour, whereas the former earpieces were grey. Please use only an approved black earpiece. By default, all unused earpieces will be unplugged at the start of a meeting. When you're not using your earpiece, please place it face down on the middle of the sticker for this purpose, which you will find on the table, as indicated.

They've now given us “put your earpiece here” stickers, so we ask everybody to abide by that. Please consult the cards on the table for guidelines on preventing audio feedback incidents. The room layout has also been adjusted to increase the distance between microphones and reduce the chance of feedback from an ambient earpiece.

I thought my eyesight deteriorated over the week we were away and that the back of the room had become much farther away. I think we have people back there. Welcome.

An hon. member: It's far.

The Chair: It's far, yes. That's part of the new measures.

These measures are in place so that we can conduct our business without interruption and to protect the health and safety of all participants, including the interpreters. I thank everyone for their co-operation.

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2), the committee is meeting today for its study of “Report 2—Housing in First Nations Communities” and “Report 3—First Nations and Inuit Policing Program” of the 2024 reports of the Auditor General of Canada.

I would now like to welcome our witnesses. We have, from the Office of the Auditor General, Karen Hogan, Auditor General of Canada, and Doreen Deveen, director.

You will have up to five minutes of opening remarks for each of the reports, if you'd like, and then we'll get into our rounds of questions.

It's over to you. The floor is yours. Welcome.

• (1105)

Ms. Karen Hogan (Auditor General of Canada, Office of the Auditor General): I just want to confirm that we are doing housing first and that I only have to read the opening statement on housing now.

The Chair: That's right. We'll do one five-minute opening statement and then rounds, and then we'll come to the second report and do another opening statement on that one.

Ms. Karen Hogan: Thank you.

[Translation]

Mr. Chair, thank you for this opportunity to discuss our report on Housing in First Nations Communities, which was tabled in Parliament on March 19, 2024.

I want to begin by acknowledging that we are gathered on the traditional unceded territory of the Algonquin Anishinabe people. This area is also known as Ottawa. I express my gratitude and respect to all indigenous peoples who have contributed to shaping and safeguarding the beautiful lands they call home throughout Canada.

Many people living in first nations communities do not have access to housing that is safe and in good condition. Overall—

[English]

Ms. Lori Idlout (Nunavut, NDP): I have a point of order.

The Chair: I'm sorry. We'll pause there.

Ms. Idlout, go ahead, please.

Ms. Lori Idlout: I'm so sorry to interrupt the speaker, but we weren't able to see the speaker for quite a bit of time. I wonder if that can be addressed.

The Chair: We're just checking with the technical team. We'll pause for one second until we get everything up and running this morning.

Okay, it looks like we're good. Lori, you should be able to see our guest now.

Please continue. Thank you.

Ms. Karen Hogan: Thank you.

[*Translation*]

Overall, we found that Indigenous Services Canada and the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, or CMHC, made little progress in supporting first nations to improve housing conditions in their communities.

Indigenous Services Canada, or ISC, and CMHC are responsible for working with first nations to meet their housing needs by 2030. Although \$4 billion was spent over the past five years to build new homes, repair existing ones, and increase first nations' capacity to manage housing, we found that in 2023, 80% of needs were still not met. The percentage of homes that need major repairs or replacement remains largely unchanged, despite the spending that has gone into building and repairing homes. In 2021, the Assembly of First Nations estimated that \$44 billion was needed to improve housing in first nations communities, and needs continue to grow.

We found that the department and the corporation had not prioritized communities with the greatest needs. First nations communities with the poorest housing conditions received less funding than communities of the same size with better housing conditions.

[*English*]

Mould in first nations homes is a long-standing health hazard. We found that Indigenous Services Canada and the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation still did not know the magnitude of the problem. In fact, the department and the corporation are currently not following the strategy they developed in 2008 to address this problem. Neither could explain why the strategy is no longer used.

There is no plan in place to tackle this issue. This is the fourth time since 2003 that we are raising the alarm about unsafe and unsuitable housing in first nations communities. Adequate housing is a basic human need. After four audit reports, I can honestly say that I am completely discouraged that so little has changed and that so many first nations individuals and families continue to live in sub-standard homes.

Time after time, whether with housing, policing, safe drinking water or other critical areas, our audits of federal programs to support Canada's indigenous peoples reveal a distressing and persistent pattern of failure. The lack of progress clearly demonstrates that the government's passive, siloed approach is ineffective and, in fact, contradicts the spirit of true reconciliation. A fundamental shift is urgently needed to drive significant progress in providing proper support to indigenous families and communities across the country, especially those most in need, who currently are too often left behind.

While the government is at the early stages of transferring its responsibilities for housing to first nations, unless the department and corporation take meaningful action to address the issues we have identified, it is unclear if the transfer will be successful. It is important to understand that these are not legacy issues that live in the past. They are ongoing and perpetual, with direct consequences that people experience on a daily basis. They stand in contradiction to Canada's commitment to truth and reconciliation.

We made eight recommendations to improve the government's delivery of housing programs to first nations communities. We are concerned that Indigenous Services Canada and the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation only partially agreed with our recommendation that they work with communities with the poorest housing conditions to ensure they receive the support they need to improve housing conditions.

This concludes my opening remarks. We would be pleased to answer any questions the committee may have.

Thank you.

● (1110)

The Chair: Thank you so much for those opening comments.

I will point out to members before we start our rounds of questions that we invited the ministers and officials to join us today for the Auditor General's two reports. Unfortunately, due to their schedules, they weren't able to join us, so that's why we have both of the Auditor General's reports happening today. There may be technical items that would be more appropriately addressed to the officials and the ministers. I know the Auditor General and her team will do the best they can to answer, but there may be times when they will need to deflect to the departments.

We are working with the ministers' teams to find dates to have them come for follow-up questions on both of these studies. I don't have dates, but we are trying to get them as soon as possible.

Just as you get into your questions, know that this may be a response you get. However, we're going to have the best conversation we can based on the study that was done, particularly now in this first hour on housing.

First up I have Mr. Zimmer for six minutes.

Mr. Bob Zimmer (Prince George—Peace River—Northern Rockies, CPC): Thank you, Chair.

Thank you once again, Karen, for this report. I asked you if I could say "Karen", as it's a little easier and a little nicer.

I was just up in a remote community, where I met Kevin. He was there raising his three grandchildren in a very difficult housing situation. There was mould in different spots in the house. I don't think there was one working window in the house. The bathroom sink couldn't function. Can you imagine a bathroom not working with all these kids and what kind of situation that was? I'm sure they felt despair in that situation.

I contrast that with Brian. Many years ago, his parents were couch surfing, and eventually they got a house. He said it was life-changing for them as a family. Once his dad had a house, he became an electrician, his mom became an administrator and the world opened up to them in a positive way. You have two contrasts—despair and opportunity.

What's troubling for me is what you mentioned in your report. This was brought up before, and I empathize with you if you've been in the office that long—maybe not as the boss, but working in the office. This has happened before. In a previous Conservative government in 2008, there was a report similar to this report. Some action actually happened from it. It was called the mouldy housing strategy and there was a real effort to combat those issues in those terrible housing situations.

I'll get to my question, but I'd like you to expand on that a bit more. Didn't you find that they were following that advice and using the methodology of making sure things get better?

• (1115)

Ms. Karen Hogan: You're pointing out something that I mentioned, which was having four audits and seeing that conditions have not dramatically improved. Over the last few years, about \$4 billion has been spent. While it has gone to building homes and doing major repairs, it has resulted in very little meaningful improvement in conditions across all the communities.

When it comes more directly to mould, it was a recommendation we gave in one of our previous audits. We audited housing in 2003, 2006, 2011 and now in 2024. The mould strategy, I believe, was out of our 2003 or 2006 audit. We saw in 2011 that it was developed, but we made recommendations around it not being fully implemented or being fully followed. It was surprising to come in now and find out that no one could explain to us why they're not using it anymore.

There are a few things missing. It's not just about having a strategy; it's about knowing the extent of the mould problem. You need to gather data for that. We found that there was only one regional office in Alberta that was doing that for a while and then they stopped.

This is why my overarching comment about the passive approach the government is using is that it will not drive meaningful change. If you don't know the extent, how do you know what you need to fund and how do you know who needs help? I would chalk that up to needing a wholesale different approach to tackling this problem.

Mr. Bob Zimmer: Using the word “passive” is kind, I believe. After nine years....

To give a fulsome explanation, “A strategy was developed in 2008 by Indigenous Services Canada (then named Indian and Northern Affairs Canada), the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, and the First Nations and Inuit Health Branch at Indigenous Services Canada...in partnership with the Assembly of First Nations.” You had everybody at the table really trying to step up and fix the problem.

I think you mentioned the billions—I'm sorry I missed it. You mentioned how many billions have been spent after nine years. Perhaps you could reiterate the percentage for the housing need that still exists out there.

Ms. Karen Hogan: Our audit period spanned five years. It has been over the last five years that about \$4 billion has been spent on either major repairs or building new homes. However, 80% of the needs that had been identified in 2021 remain unmet.

Mr. Bob Zimmer: Eighty per cent are still unmet.

Ms. Karen Hogan: Yes. That's linked to one of our big recommendations, which was that you need to have a plan to figure out how to fund investments going forward.

The Assembly of First Nations identified in 2021—they just updated their estimate—that it was about \$44 billion, but no plan was put in place to determine how the government was going to fund and finance it going forward.

Mr. Bob Zimmer: Karen, I just have just a few seconds left.

There are frustrations on both sides of this equation. You have first nations communities, which have to live in this sort of situation where there's this huge amount of need and nothing is getting done. It's very frustrating. On the other side, you have taxpayers, who are giving lots of their taxes to fix the problem. They're trying to help and for some reason that bridge is never built. That gap is never filled. There are frustrations on both sides, especially after this government has been here for nine years. You would expect some progress.

Thanks for your work. I appreciate what you do.

The Chair: Thank you.

We will go next to Mr. McLeod, who will have six minutes.

Mr. Michael McLeod (Northwest Territories, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to our visitors here today for the presentation. We certainly appreciate the discussion on this very important issue.

I represent the Northwest Territories. In my previous life as a cabinet minister of the Government of the Northwest Territories, I was the minister responsible for housing. It was a challenging position. Housing is in crisis mode and has been for some time in the Northwest Territories. When I was elected in 2015 as an MP, it didn't take long before housing came to be the biggest issue at all of our community meetings with municipalities, indigenous governments and the Government of the Northwest Territories.

Indigenous housing funding was non-existent with the previous government, so we had to create a channel to get money flowing. On affordable housing and homelessness, every day we heard about those issues. Even to this day, we still hear about them on a regular basis. Today I heard from the community of Tuktoyaktuk, where they are facing a significant shortage of professional housing for teachers. They may not be able to operate their school properly in the next coming school year.

There's still a huge gap. I'm finding in my job here as an MP that it's very difficult to deal with CMHC and Indigenous Services Canada, because we don't have the proper background. We don't have the statistics to back up some of the arguments that we're bringing forward.

Your report on housing in first nations communities did not examine any communities in the territories or any of the initiatives for people off reserve. As I said before, housing is the biggest issue in the communities of my riding. Could you explain why northern first nations were left outside the scope of this report? I recognize that we only have two reserves, but we have indigenous communities. They're not reserves; they're public communities, but they're indigenous communities. Some of them are 95% to 98% indigenous.

That's my first question.

• (1120)

Ms. Karen Hogan: I want to acknowledge that the \$4 billion that's been spent over the last five years has absolutely helped improve conditions for many, but the need is so much greater than that.

When it comes to scoping, this audit was looking at just the first nations communities, and there are no reserves, as you mentioned, in some of the territories. Nunavut has no reserves. There are two in the Northwest Territories, which were eligible for this program starting, I think, in 2022. That's when they were eligible to start accessing some of the funding. Also, the Yukon has no reserves, so it's a very complex legislative environment.

They were excluded because this was about funding to communities on reserves. In my office, in 2022, I did look at homelessness, the national housing strategy and the access that certain indigenous communities can have to those programs. We looked more precisely at Yukon housing in 2023, and it is our intention to look at housing in the Northwest Territories in 2024.

As you may know, I am also the Auditor General for the three territories, and we recognize that housing is a concern that is top of mind for many people across our country. We are making sure that we can do our part by looking at how each level of government is tackling this. That's within the jurisdiction, obviously, of my mandate.

Mr. Michael McLeod: Thank you for that response.

As the auditor for the three territorial governments, your office conducts audits for territorial entities and programs. There was a report on the Yukon Housing Corporation released in 2022 by your office. The last time we had a similar audit for the Northwest Territories and Nunavut was 2008.

Given the importance of a housing program in both territories, can you just quickly clarify when that will be? I thought I heard you say that you're considering a new audit for the housing corporations in both Nunavut and the Northwest Territories.

Ms. Karen Hogan: We recently completed one for the Yukon. The Northwest Territories audit is planned for 2024, and our hope is that perhaps it will happen in the fall of 2024. For Nunavut public housing, the audit will most likely be done in 2025. We work very closely with the legislatures in the three territories to figure out what makes sense to them, because we typically provide one performance audit a year or so for each of the territories.

Those are the time frames for the Northwest Territories and the Yukon.

Mr. Michael McLeod: I would like to ask, if I have time, about the challenges of doing audits and the lack of statistical data available in the north. I know we come up against that in many different forms. Sometimes some of our applications for programs require certain information that doesn't exist in the north. Could you provide any suggestions on how we could improve the availability of the statistical data that we need?

• (1125)

The Chair: I'm going to jump in. Could we have just a brief response? We're at the end of the six minutes, but I will give you time for a brief response.

Ms. Karen Hogan: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

A definite hurdle that we identify in many of our audits in the territories is the lack of information. It's very manual and dispersed, and there is no consolidated repository. That's a typical finding. We have findings like that even in this audit.

You need to at least gather the information. If you want to make a well-informed decision and build capacity, having a housing manager is one of the essential elements needed. It helps ensure that communities can gather the information needed to better inform decision-making.

Hopefully that helps as a quick answer.

The Chair: Thank you.

Now we'll go to Mr. Lemire, who will have six minutes.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Sébastien Lemire (Abitibi—Témiscamingue, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Ms. Hogan.

Once again, your report pinpoints a need that, in my opinion, is absolutely critical in Quebec and Canada. The fundamental issue of housing affects people's dignity. We're hearing, for example, that four families share one housing unit, which I witnessed when I toured some housing.

It's not possible to foster the development of good mental health under those conditions. We can't provide children with the conditions they need to succeed at school without an understanding of all the problems the housing issue creates. There are stories of families who have to look for somewhere to lie down at night. At night, families gather in front of the TV, because they don't have beds. The situation is urgent.

You talked about the statement made by the Assembly of First Nations, according to which \$44 billion was needed to improve housing. Since I'm the indigenous relations critic, there's an issue I find particularly troubling, and I want to explore it with you. It's in line with two of your recommendations.

One of those recommendations reads as follows

ISC and CMHC, in collaboration with first nations communities, should identify those communities most in need of capacity funding and ensure they receive the funding.

The second mentions the following:

ISC and CMHC, in collaboration with first nations, should "review the structure and delivery of their housing programs to streamline the application process to simplify and facilitate access to funding".

In my opinion, this problem is directly linked to the program structure itself and to the accountability requirements applicable to indigenous communities and first nations leaders. In my opinion, this problem is eminently structural. Often, funding must be spread over two years. Consequently, the money goes back into the consolidated revenue fund without ever having been spent, despite the lovely statements made during budget announcements and the government's willingness to show great sensitivity to the indigenous file.

Can we draw a connection between the lack of program adaptability to the realities faced by first nations and the fact that so much funding is going back into the consolidated revenue fund without having been spent, which proves that the money isn't going to where it's needed in those communities?

Ms. Karen Hogan: The money is being spent. When it isn't, it's because there isn't really a plan to determine the required level of investment.

When we look at where the money is going, we see that it's clearly tied to some extent to capacity. Indeed, that's one of our recommendations. What concerns me is that the department and CMHC only partially agree with our recommendation.

In my opinion, the government should determine which communities have the greatest needs, the ones where the conditions are the worst, and ensure that they get a fair share of the available funding. At present, funding is going to communities putting their hands up and those that have the capacity to respond to requests.

It's a labour-intensive process for small communities. For them, it's not a matter of making a decision, but rather of recognizing

their needs, which vary from one community to the next. In some cases, there's no one in charge of housing. Communities need support to determine their needs and submit a funding application. Other communities don't need that kind of support. I'd like the answer to be based on the unique needs of each community.

That said, the programs are extremely complex. For example, CMHC has 13 housing-related funding programs. Each community has to first determine which programs they qualify for and then submit an application for each program. There should be an easier, less labour-intensive way for communities to access funding.

● (1130)

Mr. Sébastien Lemire: I really like that answer, Ms. Hogan.

I'm particularly interested in the fact that you said you were concerned about fairness. Does this mean that we need to play catch-up? Often, many communities didn't necessarily have access to funding available over the past few decades.

If we want to ensure fairness, should some measures be retroactive to allow communities access to a greater share of the funding? That might compensate for the lack of funding, whether it's because communities didn't use the money or because they didn't obtain funding over the past few decades.

Ms. Karen Hogan: Our recommendations don't go that far. It's up to the department and CMHC to decide how to manage funds for housing.

I will refer you to exhibit 2.6 of our report, where we talk about small communities with fewer than 100 housing units. We wanted to determine whether, on average, those communities received a fair share of funding.

We noted that communities where 75% or more of housing was determined to be in need of major repairs or replacement received less money on average than communities in better shape.

The departments don't conduct that kind of analysis, but I encourage them to do so to accurately determine the scope of the support each community needs.

Mr. Sébastien Lemire: Would having programs spread over 5 or 10 years foster the creation of expertise in more disadvantaged communities?

Ms. Karen Hogan: Obviously, if some communities really don't have the capacity to determine housing needs and produce a plan, they would benefit from a multi-year program. There would be greater support for those communities, and this would also ensure that the funding is available.

However, this depends on political will, and it's not up to me to determine whether a program's duration should be longer or shorter.

[English]

The Chair: That's great. Thank you.

Next we'll go to Ms. Idlout.

When you're ready, you'll have six minutes.

Ms. Lori Idlout: *Qujannamiik*. Thank you, Chair.

Thank you to the Auditor General.

I really appreciate your criticism of the lack of commitment from this Liberal government for so many years.

Just to summarize some of what I've heard, 80% of first nations housing need has not been met. The strategy that they developed has not been implemented. The Auditor General has made four reports, and recommendations have not been implemented. The national housing advocate has also made some criticisms about this government's lack of commitment to addressing first nations' housing needs.

We're only talking about first nations, but I'd be a lot more scathing if this included Inuit. I'm glad to hear that the audit is coming up for Nunavut. We haven't heard what the realities are for Métis, and hopefully we'll get some information later about the housing needs for Métis.

I have a specific question for you. I'm not sure if you've read the 2024 budget, but the 2024 budget has an investment of \$918 million over five years. Could you explain to us if that will be enough to fill or close the housing gap for first nations?

Ms. Karen Hogan: That's a question I would absolutely encourage you to ask the departments and the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation. All I can point to is what the Assembly of First Nations identified as being needed to help meet the housing needs of first nations communities. In 2021, that was pegged at about \$44 billion. The federal government agreed with that assessment. They actually asked the Assembly of First Nations to do that.

There was a very recent one. When my audit was ongoing, it was a draft. It has since been finalized, and you can see that the need has almost tripled...in order to meet the current housing needs for first nations communities. I believe it's much higher than what's sitting in the budget, but this is why you need a plan. You can't fund all of these housing needs in one year. It would be impossible to even spend that kind of money in a meaningful and intelligent way. You need a plan to figure out what the gap is—identified now by third parties—and how you fund that type of investment over time. Then it's about how you support communities to actually spend it.

What we saw in our audit was that priority was given to shovel-ready projects, or projects that were quick to turn around, but that isn't the case for all projects. You need to make sure that you've thought about the needs of each community, whether they are small or large.

● (1135)

Ms. Lori Idlout: Having done this recent audit, and remembering the previous audits, it seems that recommendations haven't been implemented, strategies haven't been implemented. Do you think this Liberal government has the capacity to even develop a plan and implement it?

Ms. Karen Hogan: Even this committee, in 2022, provided a recommendation that a comprehensive investment plan was needed

in order to fund, at the time, what was seen as a gap to close for housing needs in first nations communities. I have yet to see that.

The responses to our recommendations now show that there is a timeline set up to develop that plan. I wish I had a crystal ball to tell you whether they'll be able to do that, but I hope that with pressures from first nations communities, parliamentary committees and my office, we will see some progress and a positive trend.

Ms. Lori Idlout: If they are not listening to first nations communities, they're not listening to the indigenous and northern affairs committee and they're not listening to the Auditor General's recommendations. Who else should be pressuring them to make sure the first nations' housing needs are being met? Everyone is telling them what these tremendous gaps are. Who else can we scream at to make sure they're getting the investments they need?

Ms. Karen Hogan: I'm not sure I have a better answer than what you've suggested. I think the parties that have the ability to help influence are doing their part. It is now up to the government to develop a plan and to figure out how it will be funded going forward. I just hope that it's done in continuous dialogue with indigenous people so that it's done in a way that meets their needs and their culture.

Ms. Lori Idlout: How much time do I have left?

The Chair: You have 30 seconds.

Ms. Lori Idlout: Okay. I'll cede it to my next two and a half minutes.

The Chair: Thanks, Ms. Idlout.

We will then go to our next round, starting with Mr. Schmale.

I found my flash cards. I'll use the yellow card when there's 30 seconds left and the red card when time is up. For those who can see me, keep an eye on them.

Mr. Schmale, the floor is yours for five minutes.

Mr. Jamie Schmale (Haliburton—Kawartha Lakes—Brock, CPC): Thank you, Chair.

Thank you, Auditor General, for once again talking about your latest report on housing.

I'd like to focus on some of your comments regarding the slow approach of not only the department itself but also the CMHC in their progress to address this very important issue. You mentioned that the department has been very slow to react to some of the realities on the ground, and you mentioned the words "fundamental shift". I want you to talk about what you mean, through your work, when you say "fundamental shift". How do you see this playing out?

Ms. Karen Hogan: I'll mention two things.

The first is that I find the current policies and practices that both Indigenous Services Canada and the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation are using predate many of the government's current commitments, whether they be commitments to truth and reconciliation or to following the UN sustainable development goals. The goal of reaching those who are furthest behind and moving them first is a key sustainable development goal, but the current approach doesn't really follow that.

To turn to what I mean by a fundamental shift, it would be in that approach but also in how programs are structured. Right now, if you have an infrastructure need in a first nation community linked to drinking water, there are drinking water programs. If you have a need related to housing, there are some housing programs to apply for. I could pick another need, and there would be another grouping of programs. Communities need to know where they are, how many there are and what each program is targeted at trying to address, and then they need to figure out how to apply for them to access funding. That would mean they also already know the universe of their needs in order to link them to a program. I call that a very siloed approach.

The current approach of passivity is one where every community needs to raise their hand and apply and say they need this funding, and that doesn't really match up with the realities of first nations communities right now that have capacity issues. For example, in this case, there is no housing manager. Very few communities we surveyed have a housing manager. How do you even know what your needs are without that capacity to identify them? The partial disagreement we're seeing with the two entities is that they don't want to change that approach. They believe first nations should identify the approach and their needs, whereas I think a much more proactive approach is needed.

● (1140)

Mr. Jamie Schmale: That's the thing I'm hearing when I meet with indigenous leaders and especially first nations. They spend a lot of their time trying to fill out endless grant applications, but it's one community versus another in some cases because of sometimes limited funds. It just seems to be a vicious circle we're in where they at some point, as you pointed out, have to have not only the right people in place on the ground, but also the ability to fill out the right applications in order to potentially be successful in getting funding.

Ms. Karen Hogan: You're echoing comments we heard from the communities we met when we were doing this audit. They highlighted a few things for us. They said the complexity of the number of programs and the complexity of the applications were a barrier to them accessing funding. They felt that when they could access funding, it was typically very slow to flow to them.

There is a lack of really meaningful engagement. There's engagement in order to apply, but not really engagement to appreciate the needs of a community holistically. That's why I think we need a real fundamental shift instead of just saying, "Here's a program for certain types of funding." We have decades of proof when it comes to housing that while it helps some, it's leaving 80% of the needs unmet. Something different needs to happen.

Mr. Jamie Schmale: We talk about the CMHC, and some of this falls under their jurisdiction as well. I'm going to paraphrase here. You said during your comments that when you laid it out for the departments, CMHC included, they partially agreed with your diagnosis. How did they partially agree? It seems like in the fourth report, it's only getting worse. I don't understand what happened.

Ms. Karen Hogan: Their perspective is that a first nations community should determine its needs and then apply for funding. While I'm a hundred per cent in agreement that a first nations community needs to identify its needs, the current approaches are barriers to access, and there is inequitable funding going to communities that need it the most.

The parting comment I would give you is on the importance of data. If we looked at programs that the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation was running, they were using outdated census information that didn't reflect 20 years of demographic changes to first nations communities. Even when there is a drive to make sure there is more equitable access, if you're using bad data, then decisions won't be well informed.

Mr. Jamie Schmale: I think Ms. Idlout gave her two minutes to me. Didn't she? That's what I heard.

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

The Chair: I think Ms. Idlout was trying to bank those for her next go-around.

We're going now to Mr. Carr, who will have five minutes.

Mr. Ben Carr (Winnipeg South Centre, Lib.): Thank you very much, Ms. Hogan.

Just to pick up on the last point, could you expand for us a bit on the piece around demographic changes that you referenced? What were some of those changes? I come from Manitoba, as you may know. If you happen to have it available, I'd be curious to understand specifically in the Manitoba context what some of those demographic changes were.

● (1145)

Ms. Karen Hogan: I would encourage members to look at exhibit 2.5 in our report. This is an area where we looked at the programs through which the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation receives funding to deliver. We found that they allocated funding to regional offices and that the formula for that allocation used outdated census information. They used 2001 census information when they could have been using the most updated census from 20 years later. The demographic changes over those two decades weren't reflected.

Mr. Ben Carr: I appreciate that; however, my question isn't on the failure to recognize that. My question is what the demographic changes were.

Ms. Karen Hogan: I think Statistics Canada would give you a better outlay of what they were. It could be population growth, population moving or the need for more housing. The census even points out that indigenous people are four times more likely to live in overcrowded housing, so there would be the need to have more housing, simply. All of that demographic information isn't reflected when you're using census information from 20 years ago.

Mr. Ben Carr: I'm happy to follow up with Stats Canada, as you suggest. However, is there any information to show the movement of indigenous people from reserve communities in Manitoba to Winnipeg, for example?

Having been a teacher and an administrator, I know that a big problem in Manitoba is that we don't have enough schools in communities. What ends up happening is that young people leave the community. Sometimes they come back and sometimes they don't. I'm just curious as to how that might play a role. However, I appreciate the point that Stats Canada is probably better positioned—

Ms. Karen Hogan: I unfortunately don't have that kind of layer of demographics.

Mr. Ben Carr: That's fair enough.

Can you elaborate a bit on some of the biggest issues in the homes that are not meeting the standard of quality that they have to? You've talked about mould. I'm wondering if there are other impacts that we're starting to see.

For example, in northern Manitoba, flooding is always a problem. You can look at what's happening with Peguis First Nation right now and have a conversation about some of the hardships they've faced. Are things like climate change, for example, starting to impact the quality of care that is needed for homes, whether in my province of Manitoba or across the country?

Ms. Karen Hogan: I would point to the two assessments that the Assembly of First Nations did around quantifying what it would take to close the housing gap for first nations communities. I mentioned 2021, which has the numbers we refer to, the \$44 billion. When we look at the most recent assessment done by the Assembly of First Nations linking just to housing, we see that the need has almost tripled. We asked them why it would change so dramatically, and some of the reasons given were the demographic and population shift and the effects of climate on housing. Then there's the need to recognize that you need to build climate-resilient homes now, whether it's because of the melting of permafrost or from natural disasters. There's just a difference needed in the construction and the build, which I think is really important. Some of our findings around building codes and making sure that minimum standards are being met are important. They ensure that a house starts off on the right leg and that it's at least built sturdily.

Mr. Ben Carr: Is there any data on that specifically? You may point me to somebody else, but I'd be curious to know. You talked about in the report, and it makes sense to me, that between 2018 and 2023, there was a substantial 60% increase in build costs. I imagine a lot of that accounts for the 2021 to 2023 period, which, of course, was the pandemic, with the supply chain disruptions and all the things that drove up costs.

How much of that, from what you understand, would be driven by the point you just raised, which is that when we're building a

new home, it's very different from a home that would have been built in the 1940s or 1950s? We're taking into account these climate resiliency pieces. Do we have an understanding of where some of the major costs are for the materials that are needed?

I note, for example, a shortage of workers. I finished looking at a CBC article from Membertou, Nova Scotia, not long ago that says there is funding available, but part of the problem is that they don't have the ability, even once they've tapped members of their own community, to fulfill the labour needs. Can you just shed some light?

John, am I out of time?

• (1150)

The Chair: You're out of time, but I'll allow a brief response.

Mr. Ben Carr: You have to move those folders, because the tables are so far now that the peripheral doesn't hit them.

Ms. Karen Hogan: I definitely see the folders going up.

Mr. Ben Carr: You can raise your hand for me.

Anyway, answer very quickly, if you don't mind, Ms. Hogan.

Ms. Karen Hogan: I wish I had a better answer, but I don't. I think you're raising some really important factors. The cost of building materials is another reason the values have gone up, as is the ability of skilled workers to do the builds. There's also the short building season in many of the communities we're talking about, as well as the remoteness and getting things there. There are many factors, so we couldn't target one element as being a larger contributor over another.

When you do have the departments here, I would encourage you to ask them about some of the creative new builds they are looking at. When I was at the public accounts committee, they talked about non-traditional builds that they're trying to do in first nations communities. That might be an area that interests you when the departments appear.

The Chair: Thank you.

Now we'll go to Mr. Lemire for two and a half minutes.

[Translation]

Mr. Sébastien Lemire: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Ms. Hogan, one of your recommendations states that ISC, in collaboration with first nations, "should finalize the overarching policy framework for the transfer of departmental responsibilities to first nations to ensure that a consistent approach is applied to the transfer". I'd like to have your observations on how to achieve that.

We're seeing the emergence of an indigenous housing capital network, such as the Yānonhchia' project, a social innovation designed by and for indigenous peoples. We also recognize initiatives such as the national aboriginal capital corporations association, or NACCA, of which the native commercial credit corporation, or NCCC, is a member. The latter is managed from Wendake, Quebec. These corporations want to use investment funds or expertise management funds, including for the architecture and construction of models that can be reproduced in a number of indigenous communities.

In your opinion, could that be part of an effective and sustainable solution to promote the construction of the greatest number of housing units possible to alleviate the shortage, which is especially egregious in indigenous communities?

Ms. Karen Hogan: I wouldn't want to discourage the exploration of innovative approaches to funding housing in communities. It's clear that a partnership between indigenous communities, the private sector and the various levels of government is essential, because the needs are great.

That said, ISC has the mandate to transfer all its responsibilities to first nations communities. That's part of its mission. Within the framework of our audit, however, we noted that the department had undertaken some housing-related measures but lacked a cohesive plan to facilitate the transfer.

The transfer of responsibilities isn't limited solely to the provision of funding or programs. It's essential to ensure that communities will be successful, and that requires significant support each year the transfer is made. At present, we don't see any plan for managing all that.

Mr. Sébastien Lemire: Thank you very much. *Meegwetch.*

[English]

The Chair: Thank you.

We will now go to Ms. Idlout, who will have two and a half minutes.

Ms. Lori Idlout: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to the Auditor General, Ms. Karen Hogan. I'm very much appreciating all your frank responses.

I'm going to turn to your recommendation 6.48 from 2003, which says, "Indian and Northern Affairs Canada, Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, and Health Canada, in consultation with First Nations, should develop a comprehensive strategy and action plan to address the problem of mould on reserves."

I note that there have been interesting responses from Indigenous Services Canada, from the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation and from Health Canada, but these responses, to me, seem quite minimal. As the Auditor General, what would you expect a comprehensive response to be to make sure that, for example, mould contamination is being addressed, since you said that it is a significant problem? What kind of response would be a lot more appropriate in order to make sure that mould contamination is actually being addressed?

• (1155)

Ms. Karen Hogan: I would see a response linked to mould having a few elements. One is recognizing the need to understand the magnitude of the problem, which means being able to collect from all communities what they may see as their concerns around mould, how many housing units in their community have mould and which are priorities versus others. Our audit has shown that the needs are far greater than the funding currently available, so you need to prioritize that limited funding to those most in need, especially when it comes to a very serious health hazard.

I believe you need to have information. As I mentioned earlier in another response, one of the regional offices in Alberta was gathering information and they stopped gathering it. The reason they gave us was to eliminate the reporting burden on first nations communities, but then you're not making well-informed decisions.

It needs to start with data. That would be the first step of a good comprehensive plan. Then you need a plan that you're going to stick with and implement. There is a mould strategy plan that, as a previous member mentioned, was developed many years ago in consultation with first nations communities, Indigenous Services Canada and CMHC, but it's no longer being used and no one knows why.

Have a plan to know how to tackle the problem once you've identified it, and then figure out how to fund it and systematically go after it, keeping in mind that you should try to go get to those most in need first and bring them forward.

Ms. Lori Idlout: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll now go to Mr. Shields, who will have five minutes.

Mr. Martin Shields (Bow River, CPC): I appreciate the Auditor General being here with us today.

What would be the first step in changing your discouragement about what you've seen for a number of years?

Ms. Karen Hogan: It would be to see concrete action that really has an impact on first nations communities.

I believe that the policies and practices that are currently being used by Indigenous Services Canada and CMHC predate many of the current commitments. They need to be updated. If self-determination is really what the government would like to see for first nations communities, then a different approach is needed. The current passive, siloed one isn't working.

Mr. Martin Shields: You made a comment in your document that the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation doesn't have the legislative position to do what they need to do.

Ms. Karen Hogan: This was linked to transferring programs and initiatives to first nations communities. As I mentioned earlier, Indigenous Services Canada's goal should be to transfer all of its programs and services to first nations communities in the spirit of self-determination. The Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation doesn't have a mandate to do that kind of dialogue and begin talking about transferring programs linked to first nations communities back to the communities. That's a legislative avenue that just doesn't exist for CMHC.

Mr. Martin Shields: Would you suggest that it's something that should occur?

Ms. Karen Hogan: It's not my place to comment on policy, but I can highlight when there's a policy gap.

Mr. Martin Shields: You talked about the worst and the evaluation. Whose responsibility is it to evaluate, as you said, those who are the worst and those who aren't? Whose job is it to evaluate that? Where's the criteria for that scale?

Ms. Karen Hogan: When you say the "worst", do you mean the communities most in need?

Mr. Martin Shields: Yes.

Ms. Karen Hogan: It is really up to the communities to do the self-assessment. When I made reference to looking at communities with 100 housing units or fewer, it was the communities themselves that identified that 75% or more of their homes were in need of major repair or replacement.

It really does start with the community knowing what its needs are. That's why capacity building is critically important. We talk about housing managers. We found that very few small communities have housing managers, even a part-time housing manager, to help them figure out what is needed in the community and then help them apply for certain funding programs.

• (1200)

Mr. Martin Shields: I understand the application process. It's program-funded.

If they lack the capacity, whose responsibility is it then? Is it Indigenous Services and CMHC? Whose responsibility does it shift to when they don't have that capacity?

Ms. Karen Hogan: I think this is where my recommendations and thoughts differ a bit from those of Indigenous Services and CMHC. It's the responsibility of CMHC and Indigenous Services Canada, if a community doesn't have a housing manager, to ask, "How can we support them? Do we have a way to help build that capacity or train someone or find it for them so they can identify their needs and then meet the program?" Our recommendations now are really trying to drive a change within the current practices and policies.

Putting that aside, I think a fundamentally different approach would drive, perhaps, a different outcome, and I think the questions you're asking me are what the department and the Crown are asking themselves. They don't want to impose this on first nations communities, but when they don't have capacity, they're never going to move forward. There needs to be a recognition that some communities might need different supports than other communities.

Mr. Martin Shields: That is the case in all our communities, from that point of view.

You said "shovel-ready". The largest municipalities have a group of engineers who build all sorts of plans that sit on the shelf, and when the government says there's a program, they pull one off the shelf. Small communities can't do that, so what you're saying is there needs to be something in place for that gap.

Ms. Karen Hogan: Absolutely, and that's where the partial agreement came on our recommendation. The department and the

Crown corporation believe that first nations should just identify their needs and apply, but I would like to see a much more proactive approach because the smaller communities can't do those two things.

Mr. Martin Shields: What about those communities—

The Chair: I'm sorry, Martin, but we're out of time.

For the last member on the housing report, we're going to Mr. Powlowski for five minutes, and then we'll reset. We have another opening statement on the policing report, but Mr. Powlowski, right now the floor is yours for five minutes.

Mr. Marcus Powlowski (Thunder Bay—Rainy River, Lib.): I'll note one of my greatest failures as an MP. Let's face it: There have been a lot of failures. You can ask the Conservatives and even my colleague from Winnipeg.

An hon. member: We have a list.

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

Mr. Marcus Powlowski: My greatest failure is the inability to find funding, federal funding, for Fort William First Nation's chronic care home, which I've been trying to do. Even my predecessor Don Rusnak was trying to do that, and everybody passes the buck: It's not INAN's responsibility; it's not Health Canada's responsibility; it's not CMHC's responsibility. However, in indigenous communities, as in any other community, people get old and have chronic problems or disabilities.

Who builds housing for them in first nations communities, and are we doing enough with respect to that? Did you look at that?

Ms. Karen Hogan: We didn't slice the demographic population of those in need, if that's where your question is coming from. I'd argue that census information will probably provide that kind of granularity, but we did not look at it here.

Mr. Marcus Powlowski: This question goes beyond this specific study. Who determines what you look into, and if I ask you to, will you look into that?

Ms. Karen Hogan: I'm not sure I know what the request is for me to look into, but I always take suggestions from any member of Parliament or senator who would like to share topics with us, and we feed them into our audit selection. Ultimately, it is my decision to determine what, when and who we audit, based on a really comprehensive and rigorous process that is ongoing every year.

Mr. Marcus Powlowski: Well, I think this is an interesting question that you ought to consider.

Having said that, I have another question. I've certainly been asked by isolated first nations communities that need funding about water systems, for example, given the high cost of water systems, and it occurs to me that with housing, you need a whole bunch of infrastructure before you can build housing. You need sanitation, water and electricity.

I know there have been a lot of advances in recent years to have more sustainable housing using solar, wind, composting toilets and heavy insulation. If you look at the funding we give to first nations communities, are we adapting or considering new ways of building that use those kind of processes, rather than those from 1945, when you needed electrical poles, waterworks and sanitation systems? Would that not be, perhaps, a more efficient use of money than being stuck in 1955?

• (1205)

Ms. Karen Hogan: I think it's an excellent question. I have to admit that this looks at, perhaps, the different types of funding programs that Indigenous Services Canada and the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation have available. It would probably be a great question for the two of them. They have decided the types of programs and the funding sectors that are available under housing. It would be interesting to see if they have a green one.

We really didn't look at that sort of slicing and dicing. We were looking at funding for housing, period, and really targeting new builds that were needed and major repairs that were needed where a house is almost uninhabitable. We were really trying to hit fundamental things versus really targeted things.

I might suggest that the member look at one of the reports that I believe the commissioner of the environment and sustainable development is releasing tomorrow on green procurement in the federal government. There might be some good lessons learned there that could be applied to housing and funding programs for indigenous communities.

The Chair: You have one minute left, Mr. Powlowski.

Mr. Marcus Powlowski: When we as a government dedicate funding for indigenous housing, does that money also go toward the infrastructure required to build those homes? Are those two linked together? Should they be linked together? Obviously, you can't build the houses when you don't have those other things.

Ms. Karen Hogan: There is money for lot servicing, which is probably the right term to use, to make sure that some of the infrastructure is there. That was not something we focused on, but there is funding available for that through these two entities.

The Chair: We're pretty much out of time on that one, so we'll stop here.

Thank you for taking us through the first report on housing. If you'd now like to go to your five-minute statement on policing, we'll turn the floor over to you.

Do you need to take a break for some water or anything?

Ms. Karen Hogan: We just need to switch a few people and get a water refill.

The Chair: Absolutely. We'll suspend for a couple of minutes. Just let me know when you're ready.

Colleagues, we're suspended.

• (1205)

(Pause)

• (1210)

The Chair: We're back. We'll continue on with the second report, this one on policing.

Ms. Hogan, I'll turn the floor over to you for your five-minute opening statement.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Karen Hogan: Thank you.

Mr. Chair, thank you for this opportunity to discuss our report on the First Nations and Inuit Policing Program, which was tabled in Parliament on March 19, 2024.

I would like to acknowledge that this hearing is taking place on the traditional unceded territory of the Algonquin Anishinabe people. This area is also known as Ottawa. I express my gratitude and respect to all indigenous peoples who have contributed to shaping and safeguarding the beautiful lands they call home throughout Canada.

Joining me today are Jo Ann Schwartz, the principal who was responsible for the audit, and Mélanie Joannis, the director who led the audit team.

The First Nations and Inuit Policing Program was created in 1991. We last audited this program in 2014, 10 years ago, and again this time, we found critical shortcomings in how it is being managed. Public Safety Canada is the lead in managing and overseeing the program. We found that the department did not work in partnership with indigenous communities to provide equitable access to policing services that were tailored to their needs.

Through the program's community tripartite agreements, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) delivers dedicated policing services that supplement the ones from the province or territory. We found that the RCMP did not work in partnership with indigenous communities to provide proactive policing services.

[*English*]

While funding has significantly increased over the last 10 years, we found that \$13 million of funds earmarked for the 2022-23 fiscal year went unspent. As of October 2023, Public Safety Canada anticipated that over \$45 million of program funds would be left undispensed at the end of the 2023-24 fiscal year. This is concerning in the context of a program intended to support the safety of indigenous communities.

Public Safety Canada did not have an approach to allocate funds equitably to communities. The department told us that it relied on the provinces' or territories' readiness to fund their share of the program and on past funding received by communities to determine the amounts allocated.

Over the past five years, the RCMP has been unable to fully staff the positions funded under the community tripartite agreements. This leaves first nations and Inuit communities without the level of proactive and community-focused policing services they should receive.

Lastly, neither Public Safety Canada nor the RCMP could identify whether requirements set out in policing agreements were being met and whether the program was achieving its intended results. It is important to monitor and analyze data not only to meet the communities' security and safety needs, but also to support the self-determination of these communities.

Given that this program has not been updated since 1996 and long-standing issues persist, Public Safety Canada must work with first nations and Inuit communities, provinces and territories, and the RCMP to find a way to more effectively provide proactive and culturally appropriate policing services.

This concludes my opening remarks. We would be pleased to answer any questions the committee may have.

Thank you.

• (1215)

The Chair: Thank you again for another opening statement.

With that, we'll get right into our first round of questions.

First up I have Mr. Melillo, who will have six minutes.

Mr. Eric Melillo (Kenora, CPC): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Ms. Hogan, thank you for remaining with us here for this important discussion on policing.

Of course, we know policing is an essential service. It's an important service that every Canadian and every person across the country has to rely on.

You mentioned in the report, and I believe you just mentioned in your remarks, the money that has been allocated but not disbursed, the stuff that hasn't been getting through. You said you anticipated that \$45 million was going to be left on the table in the latest fiscal year. That's incredibly alarming to me considering what we're hearing from police chiefs across the country. They're saying that they don't have adequate funding and that it's not enough.

We see that playing out in my area in northwestern Ontario, unfortunately, far too often, where there just aren't enough officers on duty. It's led to tragic circumstances. It has led to deaths of people who haven't been able to have appropriate service. It wouldn't be acceptable anywhere else in the country.

Can you speak to whether the government has given any explanation for why these dollars haven't been disbursed?

Ms. Karen Hogan: I will highlight two areas. One is linked to Public Safety's role and one is linked to the RCMP's role.

This program is a cost-sharing program. The federal government provides 52% of the funding and the provinces or territories bring 48% to the table. What we heard is that if the federal government earmarks more funding to support the policing program, the province or territory needs to bring their fair share too for the additional funding to flow. That is part of the reason why some of the funds are going unspent.

Some of the money was received so that Public Safety could transition or grow and put more communities into the tripartite

agreements or transition some from tripartite to self-administered programs. However, we saw no growth, really, in that area. Most of the additional funding was done just to meet the current existing needs and not expand the program. That would be the Public Safety side.

The second side is where the RCMP comes into play. It is not a party to this agreement, but it needs to provide policing services. What we found is that it has been unable to staff many positions. In 2023, 61 of the positions that were supposed to receive funding under this program were vacant. That's a big gap. I should note, however, that it is consistent with a larger staffing gap that the RCMP has to manage.

The interesting interplay here is that the RCMP often provides policing services provincially already. These are over and above those in indigenous communities, so we do see at times that police officers are called to do what I would say are regular provincial policing services versus the real community-focused policing service under the program.

Mr. Eric Melillo: That's very comprehensive, and I appreciate that answer very much.

I just want to get to a few other things. Obviously, there's so much in this report.

You mentioned in the report that Public Safety Canada had not defined what equitable funding meant. Can you expand a bit on that and why it was not defined? Has there been any explanation from the department on that?

Ms. Karen Hogan: I will see if Jo Ann or Mélanie wants to jump in on that.

It is written right into the policy development that there needs to be an equitable allocation to communities. What does that look like? Should it be based on just the number of people who live in the community? Should there be another set of criteria, or is it that they should have services comparable to those of non-indigenous communities? Until you've defined what equitable means, how do you know how much funding is needed or how many positions are needed to deliver that kind of service?

Did I answer that comprehensively?

There we go. They have nothing to add.

• (1220)

Mr. Eric Melillo: I appreciate that. I think I have time for one more before I get the card from the chair.

I just want to talk about the negotiations themselves. We've seen agreements expire very recently with no plan to renew. There's a real concern that the government isn't negotiating in good faith.

It was mentioned in the report that many first nation and Inuit communities felt that the engagement did not reflect true negotiations. Can you expand on what you found there?

Ms. Karen Hogan: I think it's important to distinguish between the two types of agreements under this program. We looked at self-administered agreements, where indigenous communities are providing their own police services and are just receiving funding. There was much better engagement there. There was a regular need. Was it what it should be? I'm not sure, but it definitely was better than under the tripartite agreements.

For the tripartite agreements, where the RCMP provides the policing services, most of the agreements have an auto-renewal policy, and the auto-renew is after a 10- to 15-year period. That's a really long time to go without having a dialogue with communities.

The last thing I'll mention is that we heard the same feedback. It wasn't really a true negotiation or discussion because often the federal government came to the table with the province or territory already knowing how much funding would be available to a community. You can't really negotiate if you need different services or more funding.

The Chair: Thank you.

We will now go to Mr. Powlowski, who will have six minutes.

Mr. Marcus Powlowski: You talked about equitable funding. How does funding for indigenous communities compare to funding for non-indigenous communities? If you look at the funding per capita that goes to the police from all levels of government in indigenous communities and non-indigenous communities, can you tell me how they compare? Are they close? Are they different?

Ms. Karen Hogan: I am going to turn to either Jo Ann or Mélanie to add to this.

I think the one point I would make, as they gather their thoughts, is that it's about equitable access to funding. Communities are already receiving policing services by virtue of the fact that they live in a province or territory where there are policing services. This program is meant to bring community-tailored and community-focused services over and above to help rebuild the trust relationship with law enforcement. It is for a different need than just regular policing services.

I'll leave that on the table and see if Jo Ann or Mélanie wants to add to it.

Mrs. Jo Ann Schwartz (Principal, Office of the Auditor General): Thank you for that.

When we looked at equitable access as part of our audit, we focused on the available funds. We didn't do a direct comparison of amounts available to indigenous versus non-indigenous communities.

As the Auditor General said, the policy for this program is explicit that equitable funding arrangements should be in place. We did ask the department how that was determined, and they hadn't defined it. Further to that, they didn't have any approach on how they were going to allocate funds equitably to the people who were recipients of the program.

Mr. Marcus Powlowski: If you look at the funding that goes to policing in indigenous communities, particularly remote indigenous communities—I've worked in some of those communities—a lot of the money goes to flying the police officer and their family up or to their housing. It doesn't even end up going towards the actual act of policing—patrolling and responding to complaints. Is that not a major factor in cost, especially for remote communities?

Ms. Karen Hogan: We surveyed some detachments and asked them what they thought the goal was of the main service they should be providing under the indigenous and Inuit policing program versus regular policing services. I'm not going to use the right term, so I apologize to anyone in law enforcement who I'm going to offend, but there are the regular policing services, which are about enforcement and keeping good law and order, and then there is a community-based education and community-focused approach. The Inuit program is the community-based one, so it's about understanding that it's for something different than the typical approach.

If you look at all these communities, punitive or top-down enforcement is not the kind of policing indigenous communities want to receive, so it's about understanding the needs of your communities. People aren't dedicated to that and to receiving the cultural sensitivity training they need to provide those kinds of policing services.

● (1225)

Mr. Marcus Powlowski: I think you said that in 2022-23, \$13 million in available funding wasn't used, and it's \$45 million in the next year. Correct me if I'm wrong, but you said that's partly because there hasn't been matching provincial funding, which is required. Can you tell us which provinces or territories have not been forthcoming in matching the funding?

Ms. Karen Hogan: There were many things that contributed to the funds not being spent, and that is definitely one of them. I don't know if someone has the level of detail by province.

I'm sorry; we don't know that, but Public Safety will hopefully be able to provide that answer to you.

Mr. Marcus Powlowski: You've also talked about the fact that they're having trouble getting police in a lot of communities. Did you look into why that was? Is it that the RCMP can't get enough people to join the RCMP? If so, why don't people want to join the RCMP? Is it more specifically that people don't want to go, for example, to remote communities? Not that I know whether you really have a choice if you're a member of the RCMP; I think you go where they tell you to go. What is the problem in recruitment?

Ms. Karen Hogan: I believe there's a much broader staffing issue with the RCMP having enough police officers. It's a great question to ask, should the RCMP be here. They did flag for us that remoteness is obviously an issue when it comes to staffing some of these positions.

Mr. Marcus Powlowski: At one point, you mentioned that there doesn't seem to be enough indigenous police officers. Do you have specific numbers? Is it any different? In my neck of the woods, there's the Nishnawbe Aski Police Service, which I know has a fairly considerable number of indigenous officers. Did you look at exactly how many they have and how that compares to, for example, the Nishnawbe Aski Police Service, or NAPS?

Mrs. Jo Ann Schwartz: No, we didn't look at the breakdown between the number of indigenous versus non-indigenous police officers. What we do know is that there was no national strategy or national approach in place by the RCMP on how to improve the staffing for the FNIPP, the first nations and Inuit policing program. That's something we made a recommendation about. We thought there should be a national approach on how to improve the situation.

The Chair: We're out of time.

I will now go to Monsieur Lemire, who will have six minutes.

[Translation]

Mr. Sébastien Lemire: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Ms. Hogan, thank you once again for your presentation.

I'd like to come back to what my colleague Mr. Powlowski was saying about the labour shortage and lack of interest by indigenous peoples, in particular, in becoming police officers. I'd like to hear your thoughts on that.

First nations communities aspire to greater autonomy over the administration of policing services on their territories. That requires and deserves police services that are stable and adequately funded, at comparable levels to those provided in other communities in Canada.

The Assembly of First Nations calls upon the Canadian government and its provincial partners to designate first nations police services as essential services. Therefore, it's asking police services to be provided for and by indigenous peoples. That could impact recruitment and allow police officers assigned elsewhere in the country to go back and serve in their own communities.

Has that option been sufficiently explored?

Has the RCMP demonstrated willingness to transfer responsibilities directly to indigenous communities so that they can have their own police services?

Ms. Karen Hogan: It's important to note that it's not up to the RCMP to transfer those services. Public Safety Canada is responsible for negotiating those agreements.

At present, there are approximately 680 first nations communities. There are 36 self-administered agreements, and they cover 150 to 155 first nations communities.

Public Safety Canada received funding for the transfer of responsibilities so that communities can move from a tripartite agreement, where the services are provided by the RCMP, to a self-administered agreement. However, no community undertook a transfer during the course of our audit. The money was really used to finance the services that, at present, are negotiated under the agreement framework. However, Public Safety Canada's goal should be to ensure the transfers.

As I mentioned earlier with regard to housing, to ensure the successful transfer of responsibilities, communities need to have the capacity and the resources required to manage the situation.

Ms. Joannis, is there anything you would like to add?

• (1230)

Ms. Mélanie Joannis (Director, Office of the Auditor General): In the audit, we did not look at the new legislative framework in place, which is being amended to make policing an essential service, as you mentioned. We looked at the program as it currently stands. I want to make it clear that the new legislative framework will not, at this point, include community tripartite agreements involving the RCMP. The legislative framework will apply only to self-administered agreements. You can discuss it with the department.

During the audit, we looked at the two types of agreements currently in the program to see what improvements could be made.

Mr. Sébastien Lemire: Ms. Hogan, when you released your report, you mentioned that Public Safety Canada and the RCMP had taken measures that were not aligned with a specific objective, which was to build the trust of first nations and Inuit communities in the Government of Canada's commitment to truth and reconciliation.

Wouldn't promoting first nations self-determination improve communities' faith in police forces?

Do you think that, with autonomous police forces, first nations would have more trust in public safety systems?

Ms. Karen Hogan: Of course it would increase trust in the police system. We could increase that trust by having true negotiation of tripartite agreements.

Right now, as I mentioned, the auto-renewal of agreements is really a barrier to having regular conversations with communities. That's often what we hear when doing our audits. We are told that there is no real negotiation when the federal, provincial or territorial government comes to the table. We have to change that dynamic and encourage the transfer to self-administered police services.

Mr. Sébastien Lemire: One of the challenges with self-administered policing is that first nations don't have access to property taxes to raise money for their police services.

On another note, how do you explain the lack of co-operation between the various police forces?

Does it still come down to systemic racism?

Ms. Karen Hogan: It is important to know that there is a history of racism within the justice system and police forces. That's why I would really encourage honest discussions among all parties.

At the moment, the RCMP does not sign the agreements. It is therefore important to ensure that the RCMP is aware of the agreements that will be reached, as well as the needs of first nations. The RCMP will then be better able to fill positions and secure the funding needed to provide equitable services.

This is consistent with our findings in all areas related to services provided to indigenous communities, whether it be drinking water, housing or policing. We really have to make sure that the communities are at the negotiating table. That is essential.

Mr. Sébastien Lemire: Thank you.

[English]

The Chair: That's the end of the six minutes.

We'll go now to Ms. Idlout for her six minutes.

• (1235)

Ms. Lori Idlout: [Member spoke in Inuktitut, interpreted as follows:]

I want to inform you that I will be speaking in Inuktitut. Thank you.

First, I'd like to ask you about an audit you did—

The Chair: Lori, I'm sorry to interrupt you. I'm going to pause your clock just to make sure everybody has their earpieces in place.

We're good to go now, so please carry on. If you'd like to start over, you're welcome to.

Ms. Lori Idlout: [Member spoke in Inuktitut, interpreted as follows:]

Thank you.

First, I'd like to thank you for your report regarding the police.

In the audit that you did on first nations and Inuit policing, how many Inuit communities were involved?

Ms. Karen Hogan: I can tell you that there are approximately 680 first nations and Inuit communities across the country. We looked at those that are covered by the self-administered program—about 155 communities—and then we looked at those covered by tripartite agreements—

Mr. Michael McLeod: Mr. Chair, I have a point of order.

The Chair: I'm sorry, but we have a point of order.

Mr. McLeod, please go ahead.

Mr. Michael McLeod: I'm not sure what happened, but I'm not hearing the witness's voice.

The Chair: Okay. We'll check that.

Mr. McLeod said he's not getting—

Mr. Michael McLeod: I think I'm still using interpretation.

The Chair: —Ms. Hogan's response on his headset.

Mr. Michael McLeod: I can hear you now.

The Chair: We'll carry on, then.

Please continue.

Ms. Lori Idlout: [Member spoke in Inuktitut, interpreted as follows:]

I understand that there are 680 first nations and Inuit communities, but if you look at the regions and the population of Métis, first nations and Inuit, how many Inuit were actually involved in the audit, and how many Inuit communities participated?

Ms. Karen Hogan: As I mentioned earlier, there are a number of communities covered by these two types of agreements, and we did a sample. We visited and talked to certain communities. I'll have to ask Mélanie if she can tell you which communities we actually spoke to. However, it wasn't the community service we were looking at; it was the service provided by the federal government to these communities.

Ms. Lori Idlout: Maybe I need to ask my question in English.

Since you've indicated 680 first nations and Inuit communities in the report, when you separate the first nations and Inuit, how many of those communities were Inuit communities?

Ms. Mélanie Joannis: The number 680 that came from us is public. I think there are 51 Inuit communities in Canada, based on publicly available information.

As part of the audit, we looked at the communities that were receiving services under this program. A lot of Inuit communities are located in Nunavut, but not all of them. Nunavut currently only has a framework, so there are no communities that receive services under the program.

Nunavut has the bilateral framework, so Public Safety Canada has an agreement with Nunavut to start the program, but no community tripartite agreement was signed during the course of our audit, so we couldn't look at any communities there. We did, however, talk to Inuit organizations and to a northern Quebec region where there is an Inuit population, to make sure that voice was heard.

Ms. Lori Idlout: [Member spoke in Inuktitut, interpreted as follows:]

Thank you. You may have trouble responding to this.

Another question I have is regarding first nations people and Inuit who have to move south to urban settings and have to leave their homeland. They keep moving to urban Canada. I'd like to know about the first nations people and Inuit who have moved to urban centres.

An increasing number of Inuit and first nations people are moving to urban centres. Do you have any idea how many are now living in urban centres like Edmonton, Winnipeg and Ottawa?

• (1240)

Ms. Karen Hogan: Unfortunately, I wouldn't be able to answer that question. I would have to direct you to perhaps Statistics Canada. They might be able to give you some information on demographic movements. I don't have that.

Ms. Lori Idlout: [*Member spoke in Inuktitut, interpreted as follows:*]

I believe a review should be done.

Should there be a review of law enforcement in urban centres, given that there is an increasing number of first nations people and Inuit moving to urban centres and they are often arrested for criminal activity? It's important that there be a review of law enforcement when it comes to indigenous people, like the Inuit and first nations living in urban centres, because more and more indigenous people are moving to these centres; the numbers are increasing. A review of law enforcement should happen in the urban centres.

Ms. Karen Hogan: I agree with you that a review should be done by independent bodies. When it comes to urban centres, however, policing is a provincial matter. What I can look at as the federal Auditor General is the program where the RCMP provides services. However, to actually look at the quality of the services would need to be looked at provincially or territorially.

Ms. Lori Idlout: [*Member spoke in Inuktitut, interpreted as follows:*]

Thank you.

Lastly, we know that indigenous affairs said \$13 million and \$45 million have been unspent. Probably more than those monies have not been spent. Do you feel we need to work better with those organizations? I ask because a lot of money is not being spent where it could really improve a lot of situations.

Ms. Karen Hogan: That's why we highlighted as a finding in our report that money is going unspent. If I compare that to the first hour of this hearing, when talked about housing, there isn't enough money being spent there, but here there is money available.

When it comes to ensuring the safety and security of a community, it's important to use those funds as they were intended, and even more so under this program. This program is meant to bring, really, the community cultural focus, not just bring the traditional policing services that one might expect from a police force. It is about rebuilding trust, and it is about ensuring that when communities are ready, they can transfer to self-administered policing services, which ultimately would most likely meet their needs better.

The Chair: Thank you.

Next up we have Mr. Shields, who will have the floor for five minutes.

Mr. Martin Shields: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you for being here.

The word “essential” has been used a number of times, but you also talk about program funding. Would you suggest the Ottawa Police Service is a program-funded essential service?

Ms. Karen Hogan: I'm aware of the legislation that's trying to have policing services declared essential, but there are different levels of policing services at different levels of government. As a citizen, I would appreciate policing services as long as they're done well.

Mr. Martin Shields: What I'm suggesting is that all the police services we see in our communities, other than indigenous, are essential and not program-funded. However, you state that they're program-funded, which means on a yearly basis somebody is developing a grant application and receiving money for their service. That doesn't happen for the rest of our police forces in Canada.

Ms. Karen Hogan: I think it's important to recognize the two different agreements here.

Mr. Martin Shields: Yes. The self-determined ones I get.

Ms. Karen Hogan: That's correct. If we speak to—

• (1245)

Mr. Martin Shields: I'm talking about the tripartite ones. That's where I'm going.

Ms. Karen Hogan: To speak to my comments earlier about having a fundamentally different approach when it comes to indigenous peoples and how services are provided to them, this could be included in that. Is it the right mechanism to have them apply to be part of a tripartite agreement to get access to funding? Right now, that's the policy environment.

Mr. Martin Shields: That's not what the rest of the country lives with. Under the tripartite agreement, there has to be program funding, and that's not how the rest.... When we say “essential”, as long as it's program-funded, it's not essential, because program funding can quickly disappear, and the rest of our police services don't disappear.

Ms. Karen Hogan: I believe that's the current discussion and debate happening around whether or not policing services are an essential service and how that impacts this program. I can again speak to the siloed approach. How this is put forward is not working for indigenous people.

Mr. Martin Shields: That's my point. As long as it's program-funded, it's not going to work. The rest of us think it's an essential service, but if it's program-funded, it's not an essential service. You can't use both terms. You can't call it essential if it's program-funded.

Ms. Karen Hogan: This is where policy-makers, like yourselves, can influence the outcome of the debate on this topic.

Mr. Martin Shields: You're using both terms in your report, and that's why I'm trying to clarify this, because as long as this is program-funded, using “essential services” is an oxymoron, in my opinion. You have to get it away from program funding. The self-administered ones are where it has to move.

You mentioned the provinces and talked about some of them not stepping up, and you were asked if you could supply who isn't stepping up. I know Alberta has. I know they've said they'll do the 48%. If you have it in your report here that some aren't, could you send us a list of the ones who aren't? We'd like to know who they are. If you're saying that in your report, you must know some aren't.

Ms. Karen Hogan: We definitely know the ones we've looked at, so we can for sure go back into our files and see what we can provide to you. However, I believe that to have a more comprehensive answer, you should absolutely speak with Public Safety Canada. They would be able to give you that answer.

Mr. Martin Shields: It's your report—

Ms. Karen Hogan: I can provide you the support that I—

Mr. Martin Shields: —and you've alluded to that; you've said it. If you say this is an issue, you know who has and hasn't stepped up.

Ms. Karen Hogan: I can absolutely provide you the evidence I have that supports the statements we've made, but I also believe it's a great question for Public Safety Canada.

Mr. Martin Shields: I get that. I'm talking to you, though.

Ms. Karen Hogan: If you give us two seconds, I think Jo Ann would like to add to that.

Mr. Martin Shields: Sure. Thanks.

Mrs. Jo Ann Schwartz: Just to add to that, for the first part about the co-development legislation, we know that Public Safety is working on that right now. If you have them before the committee, it would be a good time to ask about the progress that's happening on the co-development work they're doing. We did see in budget 2024 that more funding is being allocated to the co-development legislation that's in the works.

In terms of the provinces, in the report we found that money was being lapsed. We asked Public Safety why that was the case, because as we note in the report, that was something we were a bit surprised by since we know there have been many observations about the program not having enough funding. It was Public Safety that told us they have to wait for the provinces to come to the table with their funds.

That was Public Safety's response to us, which we basically wrote in the report, so they would be best suited to explain who came forward and who didn't. That was the explanation they gave to us.

Mr. Martin Shields: Good. Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you. We're out of time there.

We'll go now to Mr. McLeod, who will have five minutes.

Mr. Michael McLeod: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

This is a really important issue for us in the Northwest Territories. We have 33 communities, and I believe eight of them don't have any sort of policing. In the Northwest Territories, the policy is that if there are no police, then we can't have a nurse situated in the community because of safety issues. It also means that we have people caught in very abusive relationships or abusive situations and they have nowhere to turn. In many cases, the only way is to get out of the community and go to the regional centre. We have a real challenge with some of our small communities and with out-

migration to the regional centres, where in a lot of cases people end up on the street or couch surfing.

I've heard from a lot of the leaders in these small communities, and they tell me their lives are being threatened. If a situation develops in a community and there are no police, they go to the chief or to one of the councillors. A number of these leaders—a couple of the chiefs for sure—have almost lost their lives. I've had chiefs tell me about being on their knees with a 12-gauge shotgun pointed at their chest because a guy was going crazy and there was nobody to stop him so the chief had to try to intervene. It's really concerning.

The issue of alcohol and drugs is growing in the north. We're starting to see in our communities the issues we used to watch on TV that were happening in the south and on the reserves in the south. The drug gangs and the drug dealers are really influencing what's happening in our communities. That's a real concern.

In the situation in the north and in the Northwest Territories specifically, the ability to fund police services is a challenge. We've been really struggling to keep cash flow going to the territorial government because of the floods, the fires and the evacuations. Affording the cost-share portion for the RCMP has been a real challenge, but it's also a real challenge when it comes to indigenous policing.

As an MP, I've supported more allocation for indigenous policing—a bigger budget—but it doesn't make any difference because the partners we're hoping will join us, the territorial governments, can't afford to pay for policing. It doesn't matter if it's RCMP or indigenous policing. We always hit a wall with my questioning or when anybody else is questioning that. We'll hear that the territorial governments don't have enabling legislation. When you talk to a territorial government, you can see that there's really no incentive for them to do the work it takes to get the legislation drafted because they can't afford to join the program anyway.

I want to know whether during your audit, your office identified reasons why no community in the Northwest Territories or Nunavut has signed tripartite agreements to receive enhanced police services under the program.

● (1250)

Ms. Mélanie Joanisse: That would be an excellent question to ask the department.

When we saw that there were bilateral agreements for Nunavut, the idea was that there was now a bilateral agreement that wasn't there before. These are a precursor to having CTAs. If you don't have those agreements, you can't go to a CTA.

In the Northwest Territories, there were more funds allocated under the framework agreement. One reason, we were told, was about staffing and having officers to do the CTAs, but again, that would be something to ask the department.

The Chair: We're out of time.

Looking at the time, I thought we might be able to get another short one in for the Conservatives and the Liberals, but it looks like after the Bloc and the NDP get to their questions, we will be at the end of our session.

Mr. Lemire, we'll go with you for your two and a half minutes.

[Translation]

Mr. Sébastien Lemire: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Allow me to use my turn to put forward a motion that we previously sent to the clerk. It is related to an unfortunate incident that occurred this week, when Air Canada staff confiscated the headdress of the national chief of the Assembly of First Nations, Ms. Woodhouse Nepinak.

The motion reads as follows:

That the committee affirm that sacred indigenous items such as flags and headdresses must be handled with sensitivity and respect, such items hold significant cultural, spiritual, and honorific value.

The purpose of this motion is obviously to acknowledge what happened, even though Ms. Woodhouse Nepinak received an apology from Air Canada. The airline said it intended to review its policy, which is good.

However, consideration must be given to transporting headdresses, as they are some of the most honorific ceremonial items for first nations. The headdress is a recognition of leadership. The eagle feathers it is made of have been blessed to support chiefs in their travels and help them face challenges. The handling of these sacred items is particularly contentious.

I would remind you that, according to the Canadian Air Transport Security Authority, it is crucial that airlines respect and accommodate cultural practices, including indigenous practices and passengers' beliefs.

This motion also concerns the relocation of artifacts from the Huron-Wendat nation from Quebec City to Gatineau. I think there needs to be more consultation with first nations and a greater show of respect.

The motion is drafted in such a way as to achieve consensus, so I encourage the members of the committee to adopt it now. That would be very positive. If not, we can discuss it at our meeting on Wednesday.

Thank you. *Meegwetch.*

● (1255)

[English]

The Chair: Because we haven't had notice, this would be you putting it on notice. It has to be available for 24 hours, and then it can be debated.

On Wednesday we will have committee business, so we can carry it on then.

[Translation]

Mr. Sébastien Lemire: Okay.

[English]

The Chair: As you have 10 seconds left, we'll move to Ms. Idlout, who will have two and a half minutes with the Auditor General and her team.

Ms. Lori Idlout: [*Member spoke in Inuktitut, interpreted as follows:*]

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

When I go to the communities that I represent, all have said to me that while the RCMP may be in the community, may settle in the community and may be welcomed by the community, and they work well together, this problem persists. The police work in the daytime only. In the evenings, they take a break because they need to rest. However, when there are women, elders or children to be protected in the evening because there is violence in the family, whether it's alcohol- or drug-induced, and they call the RCMP detachment, they get a reply from central office in Iqaluit, not from the local detachment. They only speak in English at that office, so there's a communication problem.

How can we improve communication between the police and community members? I know they need to rest in the evening, and central RCMP in Iqaluit speak only English. How can we improve the communication there?

Ms. Karen Hogan: As we previously answered, there are no community tripartite agreements in Nunavut, but the way I would approach this is linked to a finding that we saw around the services provided by the RCMP. I think it starts with being in the community and understanding the community. Also, to be familiar with culture and tradition, you need training beyond the normal sensitivity training that police officers might have. We found that that was not happening in a consistent way, and I think a great place to start would be to ensure that police officers are aware of the uniqueness of these communities and their cultures and are embedded—

Ms. Lori Idlout: I'm so sorry to interrupt you. I don't know if my question was translated into English properly, but I was talking about the importance of respecting charter rights. Nunavummiut are not getting their charter rights, like security of the person, when their calls are being answered in Iqaluit and when they're not able to get the protection they need in their communities. It's not about communication but about service and whether their rights are being respected so that they're getting the protection they need in the community.

Maybe the response can be in written form so that we can close off the time.

● (1300)

Ms. Karen Hogan: Thank you for providing the clarification. The question did not translate that way at all.

I can answer it rather quickly and say that we didn't look at the Charter of Rights and the impact linked within Nunavut communities, so I wouldn't have anything further to offer.

The Chair: Thank you.

That brings us to the end of our time.

Auditor General, Ms. Hogan, thank you for your excellent work and for being here. Ms. Schwartz and Ms. Joannis, thank you as well for your time.

Colleagues, we will try to get a date as soon as possible with the various ministers and their teams to continue this discussion, but for today—

Ms. Lori Idlout: I have a point of order.

The Chair: Ms. Idlout.

Ms. Lori Idlout: If I may, can I send an email question to them that they can answer, given that my question wasn't interpreted properly?

The Chair: We can send it to them, absolutely. If you direct that to the clerk, we can share it with the Auditor General's office. There may or may not be information that can be provided, as stated, but we'll see what we can get.

Colleagues, we are adjourned.

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