



HOUSE OF COMMONS
CHAMBRE DES COMMUNES
CANADA

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

HUMA • NUMBER 044 • 1st SESSION • 42nd PARLIAMENT

EVIDENCE

Friday, February 17, 2017

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Chair

Mr. Bryan May

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

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• (1040)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Bryan May (Cambridge, Lib.)): I call the meeting to order.

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2), as per the decision voted upon by this committee back in June, we are continuing our study on poverty and poverty reduction.

I'm very pleased to be in Maple Ridge, B.C., and to be hosted by my colleague and sometime friend, Dan Ruimy. It's really a pleasure to be here. We drove by and saw his office on the way in, which was very nice, very well placed.

I do apologize for being late. We were at a shelter this morning. I'm going to blame Wayne just because it's easy. He just kept asking questions, but we learned a lot.

We have a fantastic full list of witnesses here today. We have Stephen Elliott-Buckley from Simon Fraser University's labour studies department. He is appearing as an individual. Welcome, sir.

From the City of Maple Ridge, we have Nicole Read, mayor. Welcome. Nice to see you again, Your Worship.

From Covenant House Vancouver, we have John Harvey, director of program services. Welcome.

From Maple Ridge/Pitt Meadows Community Services, we have Vicki Kipps, executive director. Welcome.

Last but not least, from the Township of Langley, we have William R. Storie, senior adviser to council, corporate administration. That's quite the business card, sir. Welcome.

Each of you will have about seven minutes to provide an introduction. After everyone has had a turn to do that, I'm sure many of us will have a series of questions. They are timed. If you see me put the mike on, it's an indication that we're either out of time or will very soon be out of time. Often I will have to cut off my colleagues.

Without further ado, we're going to start with Stephen Elliott-Buckley from Simon Fraser University. The next seven minutes are yours, sir.

Mr. Stephen Elliott-Buckley (Simon Fraser University, Labour Studies Department, As an Individual): Thank you very much for your invitation to speak with you today.

While I grew up and taught high school in the Tri-Cities down the street, I now live in East Vancouver, on the unceded traditional territory of the Coast Salish people, and particularly the Squamish, Musqueam, and Tsleil-Waututh peoples.

For the last four years I've been teaching a third-year undergraduate labour studies course at Simon Fraser University called "The Politics of Labour". I spent much of the time in the course exploring the nature of precarious work among public sector support workers in B.C. and how intersectionality aggravates an already difficult labour market. I also have the privilege of sitting on the steering committee of the BC Poverty Reduction Coalition in the only province or territory that has no poverty reduction plan.

Today I'd like to share four ideas with you that are framed by something Stuart McLean once said in an interview: "When I'm not writing my stories, that's what I think about all the time—the politics of this country and what we have done together."

The first idea I have for you today is about what we do together, and that's building a better Canada through the federal government's demonstrating strong advocacy and tangible leadership. Generally, I'm pleased to hear about the federal plans for a national poverty reduction strategy as well as a national housing strategy, as well as collaboration with all levels of government, but in 1989 the House of Commons voted unanimously to eliminate child poverty by the year 2000; that was a noble goal, but we didn't solve child poverty by then or by today. Strong federal advocacy and leadership mean doing more than making a pledge.

When the finance minister said Canadians need to get used to job churn, we feel demoralized that even the federal government has given up on pursuing an economy that works for people, where people have hope and faith in stable, rewarding work, instead of precarious work in a world of increasing income and wealth inequality.

The second idea is about collaboration and inclusion. Our country is at an inflection point right now in a world threatening to move away from multilateral co-operation. Instead of creating bilateral plans with provinces, territories, regions, or cities, leadership from the federal government means hosting broad multilateral dialogue and goal-setting with all levels of government. Now is the time for the federal government to facilitate a pan-Canadian approach to poverty reduction, with universal targets and financial support to the provinces and territories, to avoid inconsistent approaches to poverty around the country.

While the committee is including an analysis of the impact of gender on poverty, I expect you'll need to broaden your lens to examine intersectionality more fully. Oppression, domination, and discrimination affect people differently not only because of gender but also because of race, ethnicity, indigeneity, class, sexuality, geography, age, disability, ability, migration status, religion, etc.

As a university-educated white male from an upper-middle-class upbringing, I'm uniquely unqualified to speak on behalf of people who experience intersections of power relations and discrimination. Beyond having people who have lived with poverty on your advisory committee, you need to include people who are still living in poverty. The Single Mothers' Alliance BC has been running listening projects to hear from people's real experiences. The committee should establish listening projects in all parts of the country if you truly wish to hear how poverty is affecting people.

The third idea is to manifest collaborative and co-operative principles in building more robust and democratic homes, communities, and economies. I know that some CMHC representatives have spoken to the committee and that the executive director of the Co-op Housing Federation of BC will be here this afternoon. Reinvesting in renewable, existing co-op housing, as well as helping finance new co-op housing, will create more economic and human stability even in places not experiencing the affordability crises happening in Toronto and Vancouver. The federal government can also support co-housing developments that build community resilience right inside a community housing model.

There are other poverty-fighting economic models that deserve federal government support. Worker co-operatives, for instance, provide a structure for economic empowerment for individuals as well as democratic workplaces. The Canadian Worker Co-op Federation's Tenacity Works revolving investment fund helps new and expanding worker co-ops, and with the large generation of business owners in the midst of retiring, the federal government can educate owners to consider selling their businesses to co-operatives made up of their workers.

Unions also play a key role in fighting poverty and creating stronger community and economic resilience. The federal government has a unique role to fight the demoralization of job churn and rising income inequality by being a tangible leader and a model for the rest of the country by protecting defined benefit pensions, organizing and collective bargaining rights, and successorship rights.

• (1045)

The fourth idea is to make reconciliation tangible. That's part of what Stuart McLean spoke of when said he thought about what we have done together. The physical and social infrastructure deficit on

reserves is appalling because we have not yet fixed this together. Again, the federal government must lead us all by engaging in multilateral collaborations with first nations communities. Funding for homes, schools, health care facilities, community centres, and other physical and social infrastructure on reserves cannot wait for a future generation that feels sufficiently compelled to tackle our complicity in their poverty.

I'd like to end with another way of looking at collaboration. The BC Poverty Reduction Coalition has a seven-pillar approach to a poverty reduction plan: higher wages, welfare, housing, child care, health, education, and structural barriers that marginalize people. All the pillars are connected. Reducing and eliminating poverty means looking at all these policy areas through a poverty reduction lens. We can no longer afford to address poverty in a disjointed manner.

Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you very much. I appreciate and thank you for the homage to Stuart McLean. We were travelling when we heard of his passing. He is truly a Canadian treasure that will be missed. Thank you for that.

Moving on, we are joined today by the mayor of the city of Maple Ridge, Nicole Read.

The next seven minutes are yours.

Ms. Nicole Read (Mayor, City of Maple Ridge): Thank you.

I'd like to start by acknowledging that we're here today on the unceded territory of the Katzie First Nation and Kwantlen First Nation, with whom we have strong partnerships.

In planning for coming here today, I did touch base with one of our chiefs, Chief Susan Miller, and they are concerned about funding for post-secondary education for their band members. I wanted to carry that forward, but I have no doubt that you will be hearing from many first nations on this issue of poverty in our country.

As you have noted, I am mayor of the city of Maple Ridge. I'm also the co-chair of the metro Vancouver regional task force on homelessness. I am a Canadian historian who has worked for almost 20 years in the area of aboriginal issues, most notably as the former project manager for document collection for the Truth and Reconciliation Commission on Indian residential schools. I'm also mother to two children, and I try to instill values of social conscience in them every day.

I grew up in a cycle of poverty. I broke that cycle of poverty through post-secondary education. While I will not be focusing my talk today on post-secondary education, it is something that our community needs. Our citizens need very close access to post-secondary education. Post-secondary education, as we all know, breaks the cycle of poverty. I'm going to come back to that in a different play a little later.

I'd like to thank you for your renewed interest in poverty reduction and for the work being done by the federal government on the national housing strategy. I had the pleasure of meeting again with Minister Duclos. This is the third time I've had the opportunity to engage him on issues of housing. He is a wonderful representative for the government on this issue.

I'd like to note the 2010 report of the Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills and Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities. I've reviewed that report in full. It is a road map.

I appreciate that everybody is here engaging the public again. It's been seven years since that was delivered. It's a good time to check in with the public. However, I strongly encourage you to get moving on some of the things that were identified in 2010.

I don't really have a lot new to say, which is an indication that there was some extensive public engagement. We do have a sense of the levers to alleviate poverty in our country.

Because of the tight time frame, I'm going to focus on homelessness. This is an issue that has significantly impacted us in our city and definitely in metro Vancouver. I understand that you will be taking a tour of the shelter, and I'm going to speak to that in a few minutes.

Metro Vancouver has over 60,000 households in the region that spend over half of their income on housing. Over 100,000 people accessed food banks here in 2016. Close to 65,000 people in metro Vancouver received income assistance in 2016. Income assistance has not increased in nine years, while the average market rent has increased every year since 2010. These are significant issues that we face. Our homeless numbers are increasing. In the 2014 homeless count, we had just under 3,000 people who were homeless. We expect these numbers to be at or over 4,000 people in our count, which is coming, with statistics being reported at the end of March.

For metro Vancouver, one of the most significant parcels of funding we are allocated is the homelessness partnering strategy funding. It's important funding for our region, and it's money that we are able to allocate ourselves. I have heard mention of this money potentially being run through the province, and I'm here to say that it's very important that metro Vancouver be able to maintain control over that funding.

There are some challenges with the funding. There is 65% of the funding that is allocated to Housing First. That is great; we know that Housing First works. However, Housing First doesn't work alone. There are health supports that are needed. Youth do not fit well into the 65% Housing First allocation. We would like to see some greater flexibility around the allocation of funding for homelessness in our region beyond that 65% allocation to Housing First.

In addition to that, we are not able to roll over money. We used to be able to roll over money from year to year. I think it's really important. To be able to roll over any unused funding would be a quick win for us to deal with homelessness in this region.

To speak to the issue of unused funding, which is very important, it usually happens because service providers spend an awful lot of their time just writing applications for grant funding. The grants are short in their time span. It doesn't give them enough real ability to plan and wrap good programs and systems around things. We have some real concerns when we find a program is undersubscribed and we know that the numbers within the region should be saying otherwise. I think we need to create strategies that allow for service providers, who are absolutely critical in this area, to have better long-term planning ability on longer-term contracts.

● (1050)

We have very significant gaps in the housing continuum, so the national housing strategy is obviously critical for our area. We need housing. We need it built yesterday, so we're going to have some real time catching up. We need affordable housing for seniors. We need affordable housing with three-bedroom apartments for children. We know that we're dealing in metro Vancouver with Syrian refugee families who have upwards of 10 children, and we're putting them into two-bedroom apartments. That's not working. The faster we can get housing built, the better.

We also want to see incentives for the market to be able to build rentals. Rentals are really important. In Maple Ridge we are looking at around \$900 for a one-bedroom basement suite. That is not affordable. The shelter allowance, as you well know, is \$375 a month. Without a rent supplement that is high enough and for a long enough term, we can't easily get people into housing.

In Maple Ridge and in metro Vancouver, we have a significant number of gaps. You can build all the housing for people who are poor and people who are homeless, but at the end of the day, we're seeing a massive increase in the number of entrenched, chronically ill, homeless street people. We need health supports for that, especially mental health supports in this province, which are badly lacking in the region covered by Fraser Health. In their strategic plan, they note themselves that we have roughly 50,000 severely addicted mentally ill people, a percentage of whom are on our streets every day, and not nearly enough beds to support that number. We would like to see a funding commitment from the federal government around mental health, and we would like to see some standards from a leadership perspective from the federal government out to the provinces. We need our province to have a poverty reduction strategy, but we also need our province to honour their commitments in the area of mental health.

We know that preventing homelessness is a lot cheaper than trying to reverse it, so I need to speak today to the issue of children. For example, 40% of homeless youth have been part of the child welfare system. We have an awful lot of children in care. In Maple Ridge, among our homeless people, the greatest number were formerly children in care. The children are not getting the attention they need early on. We're seeing it every day.

I know that education is not within the purview of the federal government and that it's a provincial issue. However, as Canadians and as a federal government, we set standards for the treatment of our children across the board everywhere in this country. We have so many children, my own included, who are twice-exceptional—gifted and with a learning disability—who are in our school system and struggling every day, be it with anxiety or be it with undiagnosed, unsupported learning disabilities. These children struggle into their teens. Then they are subject to entering pathways that lead them to homelessness.

We also have a lot of children in our schools here in Maple Ridge who are in foster care. They need extra support. A lot of times, those in our education system are front-line identifiers for some of the challenges that children are struggling with at home. We need to be able to create programs that actually identify and are able to support our children.

Sadly, in our city we needed to reduce the number of children who were unable to access quick psychological or psychiatric care and who needed people to talk to, so our community and its citizens have paid for a youth mental wellness facility. I don't think it's the responsibility of our citizens, as wonderful as they are, or our city, as wonderful as I think it is, to have to pay for mental health care for our youth. We need that youth mental wellness centre funded, and we don't really care who funds it. We'd like to see funding from both levels of government. We have reduced the wait times in our city. It's been an extremely successful pilot, something that could probably be carried out in other cities. Our kids are able to walk in off the street and speak to someone when they need that. That's a really significant issue for us.

The shelter that you will visit today does not meet the standards of our commitments as Canadians under the United Nations conventions. We have a very significant announcement coming at one o'clock. We have had two commitments from our provincial government to build supportive housing for these people. Eighteen of the people who are in that temporary shelter that you will be visiting are from a Cliff Avenue homeless camp that resolved in October of 2015. Those people have been in that shelter for a year and a half. Five more are over at the Salvation Army. They were also in that camp. These people suffer from very significant mental health and addiction issues. We've been told by the experts in our provincial government that these people must be given supportive housing.

• (1055)

Two proposals that have been brought forward for supportive housing have failed because our citizens are uncomfortable having people with this magnitude of a problem living in their neighbourhood. We have to work as governments to reduce the stigma so that we're able to build the services that people need to get well.

I think that when you visit the shelter, you need to keep in mind that we have commitments under these international human rights conventions for housing, treatment, and displacement of people, and it's very significant that this is the situation we find ourselves in after two years of dealing with our provincial government. Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Now, from Covenant House Vancouver, we have the director of program services, Mr. John Harvey.

Mr. John Harvey (Director, Program Services, Covenant House Vancouver): Thank you.

I would like to thank the standing committee for this opportunity to participate in this consultation process for the study of poverty reduction strategies.

I would like to briefly provide some context on Covenant House Vancouver and the work that we do as it relates to the subject matter of the committee.

We've been in existence since 1997. We serve approximately 1,300 youth, ages 16 to 24, and we provide a continuum of services ranging from outreach and drop-in services to short-term residential crisis beds and supportive transitional housing. We also provide professional, outcome-focused case management services for mental health and addiction, clinical assessments and referrals, life skills, housing support, education, and employment readiness.

We are privately funded. Over 90% of our funding is private, and every public dollar that we receive is leveraged nine to one by private funding. Last year we turned away 314 individual youth because of not enough beds, and we are on track to exceed that number this year.

Having read the poverty reduction plan, it is my view that many of the recommendations within the report will go a long way to resolving poverty within our nation. That said, I'd still like to comment on a few of the recommendations and focus on a couple of things that I believe will be particularly transformational and impactful if adopted.

With respect to defining and measuring poverty, it was noted in the report that the conceptualization and measurement of poverty is complex and continues to be a source of debate among poverty reduction advocates, social policy analysts, and policy-makers. The Parliament of Canada website states that in Canada the federal government has endorsed no official measurement of poverty. The question then arises, how do we meaningfully talk about poverty if we don't have a common language around poverty and a set of metrics to measure the impact of any and all of our efforts toward reducing poverty?

In Canada, policy, research, and program development are informed by several different metrics. While all of these metrics serve a purpose in understanding poverty-related issues at some level, they are all focused on societal deficits that serve to direct our attention to what is not working. Another way to measure would take a strength-based approach that would direct our attentions to building upon the strengths of our society that are known to reduce poverty and improve our quality of life. The report highlighted the Canadian index of well-being as an example. Regardless of what methods we adopt, the axiom “you can't fix what you don't measure” rings true here.

A large focus within government policy over the years has been to eliminate and control the burden of debt and avoid passing debt to our children and future generations, and rightly so. In the same way, why would we not share the same urgency and concern of not passing on the burden and cost of unaddressed homelessness and poverty for future generations?

Costly public policy issues and negative impacts that are associated with poverty include homelessness, welfare costs, increased unemployment, child poverty rates, social exclusion, mental health problems, addictions, and crime. We must look at the solutions to poverty as having economic opportunities that will also pay social dividends because they are both related. By investing in our human capital, we can increase workforce participation and production, which will have a corresponding impact on our tax revenues.

For example, we know that if a child is educated to post-secondary, the long-term economic impact is profound. It is estimated that over 40% of homeless youth have been involved with child welfare services. We know that in excess of 50% of homeless youth did not complete high school. The Conference Board of Canada has estimated that a child aging out of the foster care system will earn \$326,000 less income over the course of their lifespan compared with the average Canadian. Further in the same report, it was estimated that by investing in the education of the estimated 2,291 youth who aged out of government care in 2011, the government would save \$65.5 million in social assistance payments and raise an additional \$169 million in income taxes, as well as another \$54 million in consumption taxes.

We also know that poverty is intergenerational. Changing the trajectory of a homeless youth through education will work to stem the future intergenerational impact of the individual youth's children.

• (1100)

The youth we see at Covenant House have hopes and dreams for a better quality of life and future. When given the opportunity to pursue their ambitions, which includes becoming educated, they take advantage of it and pursue careers within business, the hospitality industry, trade work, culinary arts, engineering, film and media, the arts, and emergency and medical services.

It is time to focus on a different perspective and approach to dealing with poverty. In addressing poverty, we must pursue a holistic approach and address the root causes of the issue and not just the symptoms. We cannot continue dealing with the acute symptoms on a short-term basis and expect to achieve long-term success.

Rather, we must commit to identifying and treating root causes on a longer-term basis in order to find sustainable solutions.

We need to move into generational thinking on this issue, thinking 20 or 30 years out. We need to take a balanced and sustainable approach that employs all the strengths of our society and not just see government as responsible for creating the solutions. We will need long-term leadership and champions who will find a way to manage political changes, economic conditions, and shifts in policy priorities. We must continue to develop ongoing targets in performance metrics that are continually measured and provide accountability.

Where do we start? To my mind, we will need to take a balanced approach that will choose initiatives having an immediate impact in reducing poverty as well as initiatives that will take longer to realize a return on the investment. However, our priority should be to get upstream of poverty, which will work to alleviate the economic and social costs associated with managing the crises of poverty.

Relative to our experience at Covenant House Vancouver, these might include things such as programs and initiatives that will keep at-risk youth from dropping out of school; investments and incentives to afford post-secondary education and training to all Canadian youth and untapped labour pools; effective family supports to mitigate and reduce the need to put children in care in the first place; for youth who do end up in care, ensuring that they are effectively supported to exit out of care successfully and transition into healthy adulthood; adopting a systems approach within our mental health and addictions services to ensure immediate, effective, and ongoing support to reduce the demoralizing effects of relapse; a national housing and homelessness strategy; and developing a common understanding and measurements of poverty.

Thank you.

• (1105)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Harvey.

From Maple Ridge/Pitt Meadows Community Services, we have executive director Vicki Kipps.

Ms. Vicki Kipps (Executive Director, Maple Ridge/Pitt Meadows Community Services): Thank you very much for including me in today's presentation to the committee.

I represent a multi-service social services charity called Maple Ridge/Pitt Meadows Community Services. We have a charitable history of serving the communities of Maple Ridge and Pitt Meadows for over 46 years. On an annual basis, we serve approximately 12,000 individuals by offering more than 31 different programs that address needs in the community. Our client-centred services support the various ages and stages and circumstances of life, including child development, parenting, victim services, mental health services, support for people with developmental disabilities, youth and parents in conflict, aboriginal services, and seniors services.

Our programs and services embrace five key values: community, compassion, excellence, growth, and respect. For the most part, our organization serves as a safety net for individuals and families who strive to live successful lives despite overwhelming obstacles, including risks relating to homelessness, poverty, food security, mental health, isolation, and struggling to cope. A high percentage of our clients live in poverty, facing complex needs and challenges.

According to the United Way of the Lower Mainland's free helpline, the top areas of need identified by Maple Ridge and Pitt Meadows residents were housing and homelessness, substance use, health, mental health, and government services.

As stated by Ontario's minister responsible for poverty reduction strategy, poverty has many faces and there are countless circumstances that lead to poverty, but we know there is one overarching path out of poverty, which is realizing human potential. Maple Ridge/Pitt Meadows Community Services has a mission to support and empower individuals and families to realize their potential and achieve self-reliance.

I'd like to highlight our work with young victims, youth, and seniors. With the help of community partnerships, we offer a program called "Alisa's wish". Alisa's Wish Child and Youth Advocacy Centre provides a child-friendly environment for children and youth who experience sexual and physical violence. They receive support services at one location from one integrated team of professionals. The reason I'm raising this particular program is that Alisa's Wish and other advocacy centres like it have received federal funding, which is critical to the development and sustainability of these valuable community programs. I want to stress the positive impacts that this centre is having in our community, such as improved forensic interviewing, improved case information presented to crown counsel, and improved outcomes for young victims and their non-offending family members. For example, by offering trauma-informed services that are time sensitive and accessible, we're aiding the prevention of isolation, anxiety, substance use, and other at-risk behaviours that may develop when trauma is not properly supported and addressed.

In addition to service outcomes, I also want to make the business case that when the federal government invests in grants to non-profit organizations, the overall financial investment can have two or three or more times the value because of our ability to harness other professionals within an integrated model and our ability to fundraise and engage donors and volunteers—all of this compounding the government's investment in our community's children and youth.

Another preventive initiative that we're leading is the Youth Wellness Centre. Again, this is a community collaboration that focuses on the needs of young people with mild to moderate mental illness and substance use. Our community came together identifying the growing number of children and youth with anxiety, social anxiety, and substance use, including self-medicating and self-harm, and the list goes on. We envisioned a barrier-free, youth-friendly location where parents and youth could access responsive services and, based strictly on community donations and in-kind space provided by the City of Maple Ridge, we opened the Youth Wellness Centre this past April. We have provided psychiatric assessment, mental health, and primary care services for more than 120 youth between the ages of eight and 24 years.

I want to stress the urgent need for funding for this project, which represents innovative clinical and medical practices. We have moved away from the notion of "do more with less" to an approach of "do differently." Innovations such as the use of telehealth capability, digital communication, and clinical assessment tools and corporate sponsorships are the way of the future.

Finally, I'd like to speak to the vulnerability of seniors in our community. According to Fraser Health reports, incidents of dementia, depression, and anxiety among our older adults in Maple Ridge and Pitt Meadows are higher than the region's average. We also have more seniors living alone, 36% compared to Fraser Health's overall of 26%. According to our community partners, a temporary shelter run by RainCity Housing reports 10% of its clients are seniors, and the food bank reports that seniors make up 22% of its regular users.

•(1110)

The impact of poverty on seniors is overwhelming. We hear from seniors who share the daily meals on wheels delivery because they can only afford a meal for one, or who have to make the choice between food and medication in their monthly expenses due to the high housing costs.

Living in poverty impacts the rate at which an individual's circumstance can quickly decline. For example, a senior accessing our community law advocacy program rapidly went from having a stable home environment where he was living meagrely on Canada pension and a small private pension, as he had worked his entire adult life, to living in a shelter. In this situation, he faced challenges with an unethical landlord and an issue with the delivery of his pension cheques. Without a cushion of savings, he completely lost the security of his home in a matter of days.

We find there is a gap that exists between the services that are available to seniors and seniors actually being aware of and accessing the benefits that are intended for them. I want to stress the importance of community-based programs that provide accessible, face-to-face programs, such as the poverty law advocacy program and seniors outreach programs that reduce barriers to access. Online applications cannot be the only option.

As an example, if you're a senior and you want to access the online Canada Pension Plan disability application, you would need to fully understand and complete not one, not two, but six separate online booklets. If you're referred by the ministry, you complete an additional one. That's seven booklets in total. A task such as this is simply overwhelming for vulnerable seniors.

In closing, I'd like to summarize the valuable role that non-profits serve in poverty reduction strategies, particularly when focusing on prevention and resiliency. We support important preventive and responsive services such as Alisa's Wish and a youth wellness centre, which enhance a child's and youth's potential for stability, growth, employment, and ultimately contributing to society. Also, it must be made a priority to support vulnerable seniors by offering community-based programs and systems and processes that close the gap for seniors to access and benefit from the programs that are intended for them.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Now, from the Township of Langley, we have the senior adviser to council, corporate administration. I understand you were asked to appear here only yesterday.

I thank you for being here and for putting this together for us today.

Mr. William R. Storie, welcome.

•(1115)

Mr. William R. Storie (Senior Advisor to Council, Corporate Administration, Township of Langley): Thank you very much.

First I'd like to thank the committee for allowing me the opportunity to come and present.

Poverty is an issue that affects all of us, particularly now with the rate of homelessness and the price of housing throughout the Lower Mainland. People of all ages are at risk, but our seniors and youth are particularly vulnerable.

Our residents need services, programs, transportation, housing options, and support to break the cycle of poverty, and we have a role to play. With the co-operation of the Township of Langley, that means working to provide a variety of affordable housing options that meet the needs of residents of all ages, incomes, and stages of life.

Living on a fixed income is a concern for many of our senior citizens, and two years ago, the Township of Langley was formally recognized as an age-friendly community by the Province of British Columbia. We have adopted an age-friendly strategy that features 52 initiatives that encompass everything from social inclusion to employment to health services to housing. Langley township's age-friendly strategy promotes aging in place and creation of adaptable homes. We encourage builders to think about offering these features when they are creating homes in our community.

Until about three years ago, the Township of Langley had no suites within it that were legal, and council adopted and allowed illegal suites. We estimate that currently we have approximately 6,000 suites being registered. Through that registration, they have to meet the building code safety requirements and everything else. It's just one more form of allowing people to find suitable residency at a fair market price.

Secondary suites also provide a great format for affordable housing. The township has put in a licensing fee and strict bylaws to ensure suites are legal and safe.

Manufactured home parks are another option for those needing affordable housing. For those of you who are not familiar with the township, we have six communities within our jurisdiction, six municipalities, and we have six manufactured, large, modular mobile parks.

A couple of years ago, in an effort to protect them, council created a policy that is more restrictive than provincial regulations for manufactured parks, so they will work with the.... If somebody wanted to sell that property, I've created the packages and the policies that say what the person has to do for the residents of the park, to subsidize them and pay for certain things if they are going to sell it, if they are going to rezone the park.

As well, the creation of additional manufactured home parks would be considered by council if someone were to come forward with such a proposal.

Rental housing is becoming more in demand, and more units are being built. In the package I've put up, this is phase one. This is already completed, and it's in Willoughby. It's all rental units. Phase two will be the same, and it will all be rental units too.

The Chair: To clarify for committee members, the packages weren't translated, so they will be distributed once they've been translated or interpreted. Thank you.

Mr. William R. Storie: Several purpose-built housing complexes have recently been created in our municipality, and last month new rental housing for seniors in Langley township was announced by the Province of British Columbia in partnership with a local church. If it goes forward, it will provide approximately 120 livable units for seniors and those who are struggling, and that was part of why that was being done.

This is one of the most important keys to addressing poverty and providing affordable housing partnerships. Earlier this month, we were thrilled to announce that the Langley Youth Resource Centre was being built on land provided by the township in partnership with the province and dozens of community organizations.

Approximately three years ago there was a presentation to council concerning youth who are going to school who are homeless. They asked for something to be done. Councillor Fox in particular championed this and over three years went forward with it, found private investors, entrepreneurs who didn't want to be recognized but were paying for it, and this is what the facility coming this summer will look like. It's modular. It will house five youth, and all the support services, the medical services, will be there for them as they transition through.

I thank you very much for your time.

•(1120)

The Chair: Thank you, sir.

We'll get started with questions.

First up is MP Vecchio.

Mrs. Karen Vecchio (Elgin—Middlesex—London, CPC): Good morning. Thanks for welcoming us today.

I have three key questions I want to ask and I have only six minutes.

John, I'm going to start with you. One of the things you stated was about needing an incentive to keep kids in school. We recognize that with changing times, sometimes trauma in the home, sometimes addictions.... What would those incentives look like?

Mr. John Harvey: Thank you for your question.

To my mind, it would less about incentives per se. It would be more about creating the systems and making the school system user friendly for the at-risk youth.

The common experience for these youths is that they have been disenfranchised by the system. They don't quite fit; it's the square hole and the round peg. Alternatively, it's about family issues. There needs to be a sensitivity to that, and there needs to be some flexibility in the school system—

Mrs. Karen Vecchio: It's looking at alternative methods of learning, then, whether it's going to be alternative education systems, online training, or one-on-one things?

Mr. John Harvey: Exactly.

Mrs. Karen Vecchio: Okay. Perfect.

Mr. John Harvey: Also, though, I will point out that it's about the sensitivity of the administration and the sensitivity of the teachers in being able to work with the challenges that come with being at risk.

Mrs. Karen Vecchio: Absolutely. Thank you very much. I've seen systems like those that do work, systems that look at what the child needs first, and sometimes that's exactly.... We're sometimes doing it backwards.

Vicki, I want to switch over to you, because what we see is that poverty has changed. We're looking at mental health issues. If we're comparing this to where we were a few years ago, we see an increase in mental health issues and, of course, we've seen a real opioid issue that's come in from the west coast to the east.

Can you talk a bit about that? What are the demographics that we're looking at? Do you see a younger demographic now? What are the needs of that demographic? If you don't mind, can you speak to that?

Ms. Vicki Kipps: Yes, absolutely. Thanks for the question.

Unfortunately, we are seeing an impact with our younger folks. I'll go back to something that Mayor Read was talking about in terms of the homeless camp that we had in Maple Ridge. Although the shelter is not adequate by any stretch, it did provide an alternative.

What we saw in the shelter was a large portion of the population under the age of 30 who talked about aging out of care without the adequate supports. Really, when we look at services such as Alisa's Wish or the Youth Wellness Centre, we are very much focusing on supporting those people at a younger age before they become completely entrenched.

Mrs. Karen Vecchio: Absolutely, and looking at the demographics of the people you're serving, could you break that down into persons who have fallen on...? I'm looking at, say, children who just make a wrong choice or children who have come from a trauma situation in their own home, as well as addictions. Would you be able to sit there and say "This is what we see most of" or "We see a majority coming from this flow"?

Ms. Vicki Kipps: That's a great question.

When we look at the stats breakdown of the 120 youth who have walked through the doors of the Youth Wellness Centre, we see that a high 90% are speaking of anxiety and social anxiety, but I don't have the stats at my fingertips in terms of the underlying causes of the anxiety and the social anxiety.

Mrs. Karen Vecchio: I've done a lot of stuff with youth wellness, and that's what I really do see across this country, whether it's here in Maple Ridge or where I'm from in the southwestern Ontario area.

William, I want to pass this over to you, if you don't mind, because you talked about these 100 units and the livable units for seniors. I saw the photo. In my own town, there is something called the Aylmer Trillium project. It's a seniors' place. It was built by the community, working together, because it was needed.

You never mentioned how you funded this. Can you talk to me? How much money did you get from federal, provincial, and community...? Can you share that with me at this time?

Mr. William R. Storie: I'm sorry. Is this the one for the seniors that is presently being proposed? It is done by the provincial government and the church, and it is being funded between the two of them.

Mrs. Karen Vecchio: Okay. For any of the other projects you've worked on, what would the funding models be like in most of those cases?

Mr. William R. Storie: If you are talking about the youth centre, the land was given by the township on a 10-year lease. Two residents of the township, two entrepreneurs, are paying for the structure. The province committed to it and I believe last week made the announcement that they were giving \$327,000 or \$328,000 to it.

• (1125)

Mrs. Karen Vecchio: I'm going to switch over to Nicole really quickly, because we recognize that we're dealing with different issues, whether it is seniors, youths, or newcomers to Canada. There are so many different things that we're dealing with.

What are the needs of newcomers to Canada, the refugees who have come here? What are some of the things we need to do or some of the resources that are lacking that we can assist with?

Ms. Nicole Read: I think the greatest need is housing. What I hear around the table in metro Vancouver is that we're really struggling. It's well known that our vacancy rates in metro Vancouver are very low, the cost of housing is very high, and we have people with many children who are packing into these smaller units. There's an urgent need for housing in this region.

Mrs. Karen Vecchio: Then housing is the number one issue. What about other settlement services, such as language?

Ms. Nicole Read: I think it's the connection to any kinds of supports, supports to wellness and the transition of children into the school system. You have kids now going into the school system. There is an under-resourced and underfunded education system here in B.C., so that's certainly a challenge.

Making the transition into employment, I would say, is another significant issue.

Mrs. Karen Vecchio: Thanks so much.

The Chair: Now we go over to MP Ruimy, please.

Mr. Dan Ruimy (Pitt Meadows—Maple Ridge, Lib.): Thank you very much, everybody, for being here. As you know, this is very personal for me, because this is my home. This is my riding.

Mayor Read, you mentioned the report from 2010. We've seen reports time and time again, saying "Let's reduce this. Let's fix this", but we never seem to actually gain the traction. We never seem to get ahead of the curve. I think there are a couple of reasons. One is that the stigma is huge. It stops us from saying, "Well, we don't care about those guys," or "They're not important, so we're not going to worry about them."

I'm an operations guy. When I see a problem, I want to go and solve it. My hands are tied because there are too many obstacles, intergovernmental obstacles.

Mayor Read, can you talk to us about the challenges that a small, emerging city like ours is facing in moving forward?

Ms. Nicole Read: There are two issues. There's the issue of the currently homeless population that costs a lot of money to reverse. Those people may or may not ever be able to seek gainful employment. There's a lot of damage done by the drugs that are on our street now, fentanyl. A number of people have to be revived many times.

I think the direction needs to go to our children. As an emerging city, we are some distance away from post-secondary education, and we've been working with Simon Fraser University to bring a cohort program. I'm an alumna from Simon Fraser University. They have great programming. Making that accessible to our children is very important. We've run up a proposal for a civic facility through Minister Sohi and a number of other ministers—Minister Bennett—that will house a museum and archives that can showcase aboriginal issues, but most importantly also house a post-secondary space so that we can bring a cohort program into our city.

We need our kids in this city to be able to access post-secondary education. Some of the kids in this city might not traditionally transition well into the larger universities, so what we've talked about with Simon Fraser University is the ability to wrap support and get some funding from either the provincial or federal government around supporting the kids making the transition into post-secondary education. We would actually create an opportunity for kids who might not otherwise be able to go to university because of the transit, the commute, the distance, or the support systems that need to be in place.

Mr. Dan Ruimy: Along the same line, poverty is not partisan. The big elephant in the room is exactly this. If all governments work together, this should be a no-brainer, so the question is why, and I'm going to come back to that.

How do you think municipalities can play a more active role in setting priorities so that you can actually pull the levers yourself? It's your city. You're the one who's tasked to run this city, and I imagine there are some times you feel your hands are tied. How can the municipalities actually pull more levers here?

Ms. Nicole Read: There has to be more inclusion in terms of the position of the municipalities or the level of government above our citizens.

We see day to day what's going on and what's working and what's not working in a city. Most of the time when we're engaging, we're engaging in bilateral conversations with cities and federal governments or cities and provincial governments. This issue came up yesterday in metro Vancouver's meeting with Minister Duclos that we have meetings with the federal government, but the province was not there.

The province administers the funding that you give it. It needs to do that responsibly. What we saw in Maple Ridge of late with our situation with the shelter is that the city put forward a piece of land, and we bought a piece of land for \$1 million for supportive housing because the government's experts told us that we need supportive housing to which we can transition these vulnerable people in the shelter. We have done what we needed to do as a city, but there are decisions being made at the provincial government level that the federal government is not looking at, such as how the money is being spent. Is it being spent to match our Canadian values? Is it being spent in terms of the agreements that we have internationally?

This is really important, because this case that has happened in our city is a perfect example of how the multiple levels of government are not working from the same value systems. We have a set of values as Canadians for how we deal with people who are in poverty and in need. I believe as a Canadian historian that a fundamental value that we've always stood behind is the treatment of people. The treatment of people who are vulnerable right now in the city in the shelter that you're going to see is absolutely substandard.

• (1130)

Mr. Dan Ruimy: Thank you.

Finally, we know that you're working on the youth mental health clinic, and there's some really great work going on there. Can you tell us a bit more about that, the challenges of trying to find the funding for it, and where you think the federal government can play a role in youth mental health?

Ms. Nicole Read: The civic facility that I mentioned, which has the potential for post-secondary education and a museum and archives, has upgrades to our leisure centre that our kids access, but it also includes—this is one building that's on the same site, essentially—the youth mental wellness facility. We need some upgrades to the Greg Moore Youth Centre, which is where this youth mental wellness facility is located. It's really critical for us to be able to get funding.

I think the federal government does definitely have a role to play with our kids. It's clear that this is a value for our federal government. Our provincial government is invested in mental health, obviously, being responsible for health care in this province, so we're communicating to both levels of government about the need. The challenge is that we communicate separately to each level of government. I come to my different resources in the federal government and I tell them that I need it. Then I go to my resources in the provincial government and I tell them that I need it.

There's an awful lot of politicking going on in this city right now. You're going to see that at one o'clock today. At the end of the day, we have kids in need in this community, and the decisions that get made about our most vulnerable people—who, in my opinion, include our kids, who need to access mental health resources—need to be made separately and apart from politics. If the federal government invests money that needs to get down to the ground level in cities, you need to make sure it gets there. There should not be spending that is unequal, spending that is done for partisan reasons. We need to make sure that the money that's invested from our federal government gets to the places that really need it. It should not be spent through the in-between provincial government in cities that have more relationships or better relationships with the provincial government.

Sometimes smaller cities need to fight really strongly and really loudly for what they need, and that's the position that I find myself in right now in this city. I think it's really important that we have open channels of communications that are multilateral.

The Chair: Thank you.

MP Sansoucy is next.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Brigitte Sansoucy (Saint-Hyacinthe—Bagot, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I also thank the witnesses for being here with us today.

Thank you, Ms. Read for specifying that the recommendations of the 2010 report are still relevant, and also for reminding us that Canada still has enormous challenges to meet if it is to fulfil its international treaty commitments.

Mr. Elliott-Buckley, in concluding you said that in the context of our study we should take the needs of aboriginal communities into account.

Can you tell us more about the specific situations there? Can you also tell us how in our report we should make room for different solutions that might come from those communities?

• (1135)

[*English*]

Mr. Stephen Elliott-Buckley: Thank you for the question.

I don't have tons of experience with first nations issues. What I look at is how Canada is as a country and what our relationship is like with the first nations. I think we need to treat it more as an international relations issue, where we sit at the table with another group of people who have a lot of capacity and knowledge about what they need, and then work together to develop a plan, paying attention to the metrics and the issues that people talk about, what they need, and making a mutual commitment to be able to address what's going on, build a plan, and have some money to actually fund it.

As Canada, the federal government and the provinces as well, we have a responsibility in our relationship with first nations to create solutions, and that includes cash, really.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Brigitte Sansoucy: You speak about listening to the people. Yesterday, witnesses spoke to us about the importance of listening to people who are experiencing poverty in their lives. We have to allow all of the communities to reassess their needs and find more relevant solutions to them.

When you talk about listening to people, is that what you mean?

[*English*]

Mr. Stephen Elliott-Buckley: Yes. I think that from an outside perspective, we can look anywhere in the country and try to examine what's going on on reserves. I watched several years ago with Attawapiskat.... From my vantage point in Vancouver, what I see is mediated by the news, politics, and partisanship, and the hot potato that it became. It wasn't just one example of one place in the country where something awful was happening; it was an extreme example of something that's pandemic in the country on reserves.

It would be great for me to weigh in and give my opinion about it, but I don't really know anything. I can share thoughts, but the people who know what's going on are the people who live there, the people who are trying to engage in solutions. They are the ones we need to listen to because, frankly, we are not experts. Even if we study and we're historians or political scientists, we are so far removed that we don't really have as much legitimacy as the people on the ground.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Brigitte Sansoucy: Ms. Read, you said it was important to broaden the Housing First program and make it more flexible. Did you also mean that we have to find preventive solutions?

[*English*]

Ms. Nicole Read: Absolutely. I think there has to be prevention in any housing solution that we're dealing with. The Housing First money is spent under a very good principle: we invest in housing first because people can't think about getting their lives forward without having safe housing, a shelter, a roof over their heads. However, a number of the people we're trying to house through the Housing First model in metro Vancouver need other things. The other things are not being provided. We need some means of bringing together resources to provide solutions such as outreach.

Vicki Kipps mentioned the number of forms. We see this across the board with people who are in poverty—the number of forms they have to sign to get access to services. We need resources that can work with people, sit with them, and transition them into the different services that they need through the continuum.

In this province, if we put people in housing under Housing First and those people need health care, there is an expectation that they will be able to make it to appointments. Things like that are simple for all of us, for you and me, but some of these people who are really struggling need help. They need assistance, and it's ongoing, and it's beyond Housing First.

The other thing is that Housing First doesn't fit well for youth, who are within the provincial system of care, yet we see them on our streets. Just a couple of weeks ago, we were notified about a youth who was sleeping in McDonald's. We were trying to mobilize food cards because McDonald's was willing to have the child sleep overnight in their restaurant as long as he was buying food.

This is not something that fits well within the 65% allocation for Housing First. We need to have a bit of flexibility around that 65% so that we can allocate it, as a region, into the areas that we feel... We'll try to invest the 65% in Housing First because we are working under Housing First principles—there is no question about that—but we do need a little more flexibility in terms of the proposals we accept.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Brigitte Sansoucy: You talked about the importance of working together. I will put the same question to you as I put to Mr. Elliott-Buckley.

In the programs we are going to propose, should we make more room for the communities so that they can define their needs themselves, as well as the solutions and programs, and what must be developed for each of them?

• (1140)

[*English*]

Ms. Nicole Read: Absolutely. We know our community well. We work together, especially in this community, where we have a very connected environment of service provision. We have eyes on the ground all of the time. We know what we need in this community. We shouldn't be subject to higher levels of government making decisions about what we need in this community, decisions that are partisan-based or steeped in politics.

At the end of the day, when we have kids in need and we have vulnerable adults in need, we need to get in and support them. We do need a stronger voice, but we don't have power in the voice. It's sad, because right now....

Fighting for vulnerable people in this community as I do comes from a long history of working with some of the aboriginal communities across our country and understanding that sometimes you have to stand in a tough pocket to make change, but at the end of the day, I shouldn't have to scream. I shouldn't have to get angry. I shouldn't have to leverage the media in order to get the resources I need for vulnerable people in this community. It's wrong. I should be able to have a conversation, which I've done with my MP, and have conversations with my MLA, and know that as Canadians, with values that support vulnerable people, we will drive the resources that we have available to make those changes.

That's not what's happening in this community. In this community, when I need services brought to something.... When I had a tent city on a residential street, I had to scream in the media. I had to bring in the opposition.

It's wrong. It's just wrong. It's a waste of my valuable resources that could be going into other things in our community, like making sure that we are driving the messages up to higher levels of government about our seniors and our kids.

The Chair: Thank you. I don't think anyone here disagrees with that sentiment.

Next, for six minutes, we have MP Dhillon, please.

Ms. Anju Dhillon (Dorval—Lachine—LaSalle, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

My questions will mostly be for you, Nicole. I think the passion we hear in your voice, the frustration, touches all of us around this table.

You mentioned the fight you have to represent those who have no voice, those who are vulnerable, and you said you had to go to the opposition, to the media. Has that been very effective?

Ms. Nicole Read: I do find that the media are fairly effective. There's a fairly good understanding. There's a very significant difference in metro Vancouver between the very, very urban area, which is acclimatized to dealing with people who are vulnerable, and the suburban area, which is not as acclimatized. There's a lot of stigma in this city right now, a lot of fear. It's understandable fear, because when you don't have outcomes around mental health and addiction....

The reality is that addiction does impact communities in a way that is different from the way cancer impacts communities. I can say that and still support vulnerable people, but there's a reality for our citizens that there are some scary elements to this when you locate supportive housing in a neighbourhood.

We need to be standing up for values. I shouldn't have to be screaming in the media. I shouldn't have to be leveraging the outside regional media or the national media to get attention to this issue, but I am. That's what will happen again today and for the next several days after the announcement at one o'clock. It shouldn't be that way. We need a better form of communication.

Ms. Anju Dhillon: You mentioned the provinces, the municipalities, and the federal level. You don't care about the jurisdiction issues they have with each other; you just need the money, especially when it comes to mental health.

In December the federal government was offering provinces money especially geared toward mental health and home care, but it was rejected because it was specific. What are your views on that?

Ms. Nicole Read: I understand that there are concerns about the jurisdictional nature of funding and how we make decisions, but the reality is that our Canadian values trump politics. They have to, because that's who we are as people. That is what we're known for internationally.

For me, my re-election does not matter when I have a mattress shop full of people sleeping next to each other on cots with no privacy and no dignity. For me, that has to be the paramount issue for why I'm here and what I use my voice for. Unfortunately, we do step into the jurisdictional issues when we make the decision.

We're told by the experts in the province, for example, that these people are so ill that they need to be in a congregant model of care, so we work together to try to deliver the congregant model of care. Then the public stands up and says they don't want the congregant model of care in their backyard, so the provincial government says there's no more congregant model of care.

How can that happen when we as Canadians have signed international human rights treaties to say that we will make sure our vulnerable people are housed and are not forcibly displaced, that we will take care of people with disabilities in this country? We have a very obvious example of how that is not happening right now. It shouldn't just be me as a Canadian who's concerned: this is the value system for all Canadians.

We had provincial experts telling us the things we need to do, so then why aren't we doing them? If we have experts tell us how we need to deal with cancer in this country, we don't have citizens stand up and say, "I'm sorry; I don't agree with that." We have to take care of people who have mental health issues. The only way we can deal with stigma in this country around mental health and addiction is to say, as leaders, that we will support these people because as Canadians that's what we have to do.

• (1145)

Ms. Anju Dhillon: Would you like to have seen the money come in that was offered in December for mental health and home care?

Ms. Nicole Read: Every city in metro Vancouver will say the same thing: when it comes to mental health treatment and care in this province, we do not have enough resources.

We have families who wait significant periods of time to connect to the services they need. The reality is that poverty and mental illness are connected. Sometimes people really struggle and fall out of their housing. We see them on the streets. That is the most critical situation that we have in this province.

There should be no dickered around jurisdictional issues when it comes to funding that is needed on the ground for people's health care.

Ms. Anju Dhillon: Okay.

Regarding people with physical disabilities, are you able to help them, or do they need special care?

Ms. Nicole Read: We have a number of people who have been on our streets and in our shelter over time who have different levels of physical disabilities.

We had a woman who was a leader in our homeless camp. Her name is Linda, and she's a pretty phenomenal person. She has struggled her whole life. She had a broken arm that was untreated, basically hanging, for years. We have that kind of condition going on in our streets.

I was told by one of our staff members that we have another individual who is hunched over and sleeping in a chair at night at our shelter.

There are very significant physical disabilities that people meet with, especially when they've been on the streets for a long period of time. They have very significant health care needs.

When we deal with people with disabilities who are housed, we need to do everything we can to support them as well, so that they are able to access services. As a city, we have an accessibility committee. We work every day to make sure that people who are disabled in our community can access services equally with everybody else.

Ms. Anju Dhillon: You mentioned that the shelter we're going to visit later today is not up to standard. Could you please elaborate on that?

The Chair: Be very brief, please.

Ms. Nicole Read: Yes.

The temporary shelter was put together to move people out of the Cliff Avenue camp. It was meant to be a six-month endeavour. It is an open mattress shop with cots next to each other and one bathroom. It was never meant to be open for 18 months. It has been extended over and over again while the provincial government tries to figure out how to deliver supportive housing in this community. These people are the sickest of our street population. Under no circumstances should we be in a situation where we have people in that state for that period of time.

Ms. Anju Dhillon: Sick, as in mentally?

The Chair: Thank you. I have to cut you off, sorry.

MP Long is next, please.

Mr. Wayne Long (Saint John—Rothesay, Lib.): Thank you, Chair, and welcome to everybody. These are wonderful presentations this morning.

One thing I think the government tends to do at the federal level is to try to alleviate situations. For example, I think we've done some good things with the Canada child benefit. I think that is something that will be transformational over time. There is an increase in the IAH, investment in affordable housing. Those things are great programs, though they're certainly not the solution.

I'm going to shift gears a little bit and start with Mr. Elliott-Buckley.

We're a committee that is travelling the country. We're going to advise the minister on coming up with a national poverty reduction strategy. As we know, there are lots of different pockets and bubbles, whether of shelters, housing, or mental health. We need, obviously, big support in all of them.

Strategically, what would you do over the long term to get upstream of poverty, as Mr. Harvey said, especially generational poverty, in Canada? I do have an answer in mind, but I want to hear what you say. What would you do?

• (1150)

Mr. Stephen Elliott-Buckley: I think the social determinants of health approach to health care, for instance, attempts to build a different way of addressing policy issues. As a policy wonk, I can list off by ranked order the things that I think are most important, but what we need to move out of is looking at things piecemeal.

Looking through a poverty reduction lens means taking a look at everything we do, from energy to our job creation programs to what we do with kids and seniors. It means looking at all the facets of our society, and considering how all those things contribute to the nature of poverty for different kinds of people in different circumstances in Canada. It means looking at all the different programs that we provide and examining how they can be tuned to address poverty issues at the outset as well as how they can be used to address people who are suffering.

Mr. Wayne Long: I'll just stay with you, if you don't mind. Could you give me your thoughts on how effective you think a national early learning strategy would be?

I think in Germany they start as early as two years old. Could you give me your thoughts on a national early learning strategy for three- and four-year-olds? It would obviously have to be tailored specifically to each province, but how important do you think early learning is to breaking the cycle of poverty?

Mr. Stephen Elliott-Buckley: I started reading about the British Columbia School Trustees Association's approach to early learning in the 1990s. They're even dealing with kids who aren't in the system yet. We're talking about preparing kids to be able to arrive in kindergarten. My wife works with the West Side Family Place in Vancouver. That has early childhood programs, and they liaise with elementary schools in their neighbourhood.

Those are critical for making sure that kindergarten isn't a burden for people. I think no matter how you implement it, in whatever community across the country, being able to have some kind of national approach to it, with a collaborative goal-setting structure between provinces and communities, would be wonderful.

Mr. Wayne Long: My riding, Saint John—Rothesay, is in southern New Brunswick. We unfortunately lead the country in LIM, in child poverty, and in many other factors.

Mayor Read, if as a committee we want to make recommendations, I know we need more money for mental health and affordable housing and all those things. From a committee standpoint, what do you want us to recommend to Minister Duclos? I understand the alignment of government and the issues and the politics. We see it in every province. What would you recommend that we say to Minister Duclos to break that long-term cycle of poverty?

Ms. Nicole Read: I have to call on personal experience here. In the last year, both of my kids have been diagnosed as gifted and with learning disabilities. I have had a new understanding of what our parents and their children face in our school system. It is underfunded.

The children are not being connected when they have learning disabilities, anxiety, or any challenge that is outside that middle child. The middle child works well within the learning environment that caters to the middle. We have good results with those children. However, in our system there are an awful lot of children with ADHD and anxiety disorders and learning disabilities. They are not being connected.

There is a very important legal case called *Moore v. British Columbia*. The Supreme Court of Canada basically said that we need to provide the ramp for these learning-disabled children to access their charter right to education. I do not believe from my personal experience and after having spoken to so many families in the province of British Columbia that we are providing the ramp.

The early learning opportunities are good, and we need child care in this province. I believe that we need a child care plan to give families safe spaces for their children, and maybe that will allow those children to also learn. There's a relationship between those things. We also need to make sure that the children who are not on

that even trajectory through the school system are given the support they need to have equal access to opportunities.

Mr. Wayne Long: Thank you.

Mr. Harvey, in Saint John we have children show up for school who are five years old who can't tie their shoes. They have absolutely no social skills. There are serious mental health issues. Those children, those families, are behind from day one.

Can you give me your thoughts on early learning and how important it would be to break that generational cycle, please?

The Chair: You have about 30 seconds.

Mr. John Harvey: I'm going to answer that in a different way, I think.

We need to learn from the lessons of the past. In 1993, we stopped funding the national housing program. Twenty-five years on, we got it. In 1968, a very similar government committee was meeting on poverty and trying to figure out what we needed to do. Very similar questions were asked and similar strategies were employed.

We need early learning intervention, absolutely. We need day care, absolutely, but we need to ask ourselves what our civic contract is that we are going to adopt. As Nicole was saying, what do we believe to be true in terms of our responsibilities and the values that we have to enforce among our citizens, and not be subject to the sway and the times and the changing conditions, policies, and governments?

We have a homelessness crisis now that started in 1993. It was probably there before, but it certainly started in 1993. If we don't take the responsibility and say that our citizens have a right to be fed, to be housed, to be educated, to be cared for—all those things—and enshrine them in such a way that they can't be subject to shifting conditions and political tides, we will be having this conversation again.

• (1155)

Mr. Wayne Long: Thank you. I agree.

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll go over to MP Warawa, please.

I'll just note that I am going to extend for about 10 or 15 minutes because we were late. There will time for a few more quick questions.

Go ahead.

Mr. Mark Warawa (Langley—Aldergrove, CPC): Thank you, Chair.

Thank you to the witnesses for being here.

We began today by visiting The Gateway of Hope in Langley.

There was a call for consideration of possibly more witnesses. Mr. Storie, you came to mind immediately. To get it through the cycle of approval within the township and the committee took a few days, so you have our apologies for a last-minute request to have you here, but I'm glad you are.

It provides a unique perspective, in that north of the Fraser River you have Maple Ridge and Pitt Meadows, while south of the Fraser River you have Langley city and Langley township. They have similar populations—Langley is just a little larger, about 10%—and they are facing very similar issues. They have similar climates, similar topography. Maple Ridge is a little more mountainous, but they're very close and facing similar issues.

In 2005 the community came together with all levels of government and leaders throughout the community who represented everything from fire rescue and police to school boards. All levels of government and all the leaders came together and said, “What is the number one issue we want to work together on?”

I believe you were there in 2005. From that we said, as leaders, that the number one issue was homelessness. It was a growing problem. I know you were involved with that whole process, and you continue to be involved with the homelessness issue and also taking care of seniors and the drug issues. From that 2005 meeting, we had a couple of people in the community who said they would take the leadership on that issue. We ended up a couple of years later with The Gateway of Hope, funded by all levels of government participating in it.

When we say things are underfunded, it means more taxes. Either taxes need to be increased to provide the extra funding or we change how those funds are allocated. That's the challenge of every level of government, whether it's municipal, provincial, or federal. You don't want to raise taxes unless it's absolutely necessary.

What was unique in Langley was that Langley provided the land, and in the different examples you gave, there was no request for additional funding. There were some grants provincially and federally to help pay for that, and the land came from local government.

You've been right on the front line and now you're the senior adviser to council. In the years that you've been involved with these issues, what has worked and what hasn't worked? I think we have very different results north of the Fraser and south of the Fraser. All levels of government have worked together. We haven't solved all the problems south of the Fraser, but what has worked and what has not?

• (1200)

Mr. William R. Storie: I think I should back up a bit and explain how he's talking about my being front line.

Starting in 1990, I was involved with the bylaw department, oversaw the bylaw department, started out my career with the bylaw department, and dealt with many homeless people on a daily basis. I'd instruct staff and I helped staff follow the rules that I set down. I always believed, whether we saw a homeless person for the first time or the thousandth time, that we'd treat them with dignity and respect and try to put them in touch with resources. In the township, I worked really well with Fraser Holland. He started with an outreach program from Stepping Stone, and we worked really closely together.

Over the years, I have thought that what works well is forming a relationship with these people. I think that there's an element of mistrust when you first approach them, and over time that kind of

subsides. If you can get a rapport with them and get them looking at alternatives....

Mayor Read brought up a good point in saying that to house somebody and not have the other elements to go with it to support them is just doing a disservice to them. I've seen the failure of putting people into a residence who then get evicted the following month because all of a sudden they have a few friends they socialize with out in the encampments, and now they're housing there, and pretty soon they've got shopping carts full of stuff. I think the success is in forming the relationships.

I think Mayor Read also touched on something that's very difficult. I've been in politics or around politics for many years, more than I'd care to remember sometimes, but I find that Nimbyism really.... You have a plan, you put it in place, you're looking toward getting a structure built that's going to help these people, and all of a sudden the placards go up, the petitions go up, and they say “Not in my neighbourhood”. It has to be somewhere, right?

I think if it's done correctly, you have to take a stand and say, “This is where it's going to be built. This is for the betterment of the community; it's for betterment of mankind, womankind, childkind, whatever.” You have to make a point somewhere along the line, and politics does seem to get in the way provincially, federally, and municipally sometimes. There are people looking toward the next election, so things don't always go the way we want to see them go.

I hope that answered you.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Ruimy, you have a shortened question time, about four and a half or five minutes.

Mr. Dan Ruimy: Thanks. I want more than that.

Very quickly, before I move on to Ms. Kipps, Mayor Read, do you have any comments on that?

Ms. Nicole Read: I do. South of the Fraser has a very significant homeless problem. There is a street in Surrey that has a large number of homeless people. We recently saw the death of a youth who was aged out of care who died in a tent in Surrey. That was just recently. We're seeing homeless issues on both sides of the Fraser Valley, north and south.

Mr. Dan Ruimy: Thank you.

We're going to switch gears.

Ms. Kipps, I hear the frustration that's going on and everything, but I also know that we've got great things going on in our community. We've got great people who are, like my colleague on the other side, working together. There are challenges, but I'd like you to speak to some of the great things that you guys are doing that are having an impact on our youth, for instance, and on our seniors. You have the floor.

Ms. Vicki Kipps: Thank you very much.

What a great opportunity to highlight some of the successes that are happening in our community. Really, it's a short answer to say that those successes are derived from engaging people in the solution.

When we talk about the value of engaging stakeholders, I wholeheartedly encourage that. It's engaging people with lived experience, either living in situations of poverty, raising a child with a developmental disability, having a teenager with a mental illness, or having a senior who is living at home and being in that sandwich generation. The situations of life that we find ourselves don't matter; it is engaging people in the solutions.

We have had tremendous success in our communities of Pitt Meadows and Maple Ridge by bringing people together. We have an organization called the Maple Ridge-Pitt Meadows-Katzie Community Network. It's not a stand-alone organization, if you will, but it's a co-operative of faith-based organizations, government organizations, social services organizations, and citizens who come together and brainstorm solutions for our community.

Because of that, we've made a commitment to each other not to compete for funding when there are those provincial or federal grant opportunities, but rather to partner to see which organization has the competency to do that well. We support each other. We partner. We have found that we serve far more citizens and we address far more needs in our community when we work collaboratively through that community network, through things such as Alisa's Wish and the youth wellness centre to support dire situations that we know of on the street. We are all connected via email; obviously we're respectful of ethics and confidentiality, but we do not hesitate to reach out to each other to say, "There is this youth" or "There is this senior" or "There is this family", and what can we do?

I would encourage some bravery to continue to look at wish number one—that there would always be new funding—but reality number two would be the courage to look at the reallocation of funding, at innovative solutions, and look at some of those initiatives across the country and some of them right here locally.

Dr. Matthew Chow, the psychiatrist, is a leader who is turning psychiatry on its head. We are providing psychiatric services to more youth in our community than in Vancouver, because of his approach from a community-integrated model. The idea is to be innovative.

Thank you.

● (1205)

Mr. Dan Ruimy: Thank you.

Very quickly, I'm going to move on to Mr. Harvey.

When we had our national housing strategy round table, you said something to me in regard to a national housing strategy going hand in hand with a mental health strategy, and you gave me a number.

Do you remember that conversation, and can you talk about that?

The Chair: Give a very brief answer, please.

Mr. John Harvey: I can barely remember yesterday, let alone....

I'll draw on the numbers as they come to mind, and our experience at Covenant House.

We know that 30% of the homeless youth we serve have acute mental health issues. About a year ago, we had a change in our model for the crisis program, the short-term residential beds, and we went to gender-specific programming. At any given time, historically, about 25% of our population would be female. Since we made that change, we've brought it up to about 50%. In the female population, no less than 60% of the time will we have an actual diagnosis of mental health issues. The diagnosis of mental health issues in the homeless population is significant.

We do know, and the research bears it out, that if you put somebody inside a house, with a roof and four walls, safe and clean, you will find the mental health issues stabilize, even if you did nothing else.

Of course, doing nothing else is not enough. I want to make this point here. We are in a crisis with respect to homelessness, and it's been a long time coming, but homelessness is only a symptom; it's not the actual crisis. That's where our attention is drawn to, and rightly so, but we got here over the course of 25 years, and we have an opportunity right now, again....

In 1968 we started a very similar conversation, and we're going to keep having this conversation until we actually say, "What is our responsibility?" The question we're going to ask with respect to housing is this: "Is housing a right, or is housing a privilege? Are timely medical supports a right or a privilege? Is education for our youth a right or a privilege?" Those are fundamental. If you go down the rabbit hole, you're going to come out in different places on different answers. It's how you choose to answer that question.

I also want to point out what Mayor Read pointed out earlier: Housing First is great—we need to get people into buildings—but it has to come with the accompanying resources to support the individual to stay. In terms of evidence, Housing First is only for mental health and addictions. For everything else there's a lot of evidence informing us that it's promising, but we only have the evidence to know that if you put individuals who have mental health issues and addiction in housing and support them, they are going to have a good outcome.

These are nuances, technical questions. I'm going to go back to what I said before: what do we believe to be true of our citizens?

● (1210)

The Chair: Excellent. Thank you very much, sir.

For the last word, it's MP Sansoucy.

[Translation]

Ms. Brigitte Sansoucy: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I am pleased that for the second time in two days a woman who works in the field is challenging us to be courageous.

Ms. Read, you said earlier that you had witnessed the situations indigenous communities experience. In the context of our study, what particular situations should we consider? What should we propose to allow different solutions to emerge from those communities?

[English]

Ms. Nicole Read: You know, I would be remiss to not say that we have a very bad history as Canadians in dealing with some of these issues with aboriginal people, most notably taking kids away from their families and putting them in residential schools. That's created a huge fracture that's multi-generational, and it's going to take time to heal.

I believe first nations in this country need to be engaged on the issues to speak to what kinds of resources they need and how to use funding. Clearly, we need to make sure that aboriginal children are connecting to education, that we are really supporting aboriginal children in our public education system and giving them opportunities to access post-secondary education.

We have reserves in this country that don't have proper housing or safe water. We're dealing with, on some of our reserves, third-world living conditions. We can't do that anymore. We have to be able to engage first nations leadership across the country and look at ways to fund, with a large significant package, ways to get the reserves up to the standard the rest of our country enjoys. I think that's very important.

Also on the issue of health care, I watched on the news—and I'm sorry I can't recall the actual aboriginal community that had a suicide pact most recently—and saw that a private donor came forward and donated over \$300,000. Why is a private donor having to donate \$300,000 when aboriginal children on reserve have a suicide pact and parents are losing their children? That's not acceptable. We need to support these communities.

We have gone through litigation for years to reach a settlement agreement and to get an apology on residential schools. But the whole taking away of children from a family... The children didn't get parented in residential schools. They didn't learn how to be parents. Then they came out of the schools and they had their own children. There's so much residual pain that's connected to the history of that system that it is going to take many generations to heal. In that healing journey, we need to make sure that we're supporting people emotionally with mental health resources and parenting resources. I think that's really important.

Many good recommendations came out of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission around these issues, and we have very good leadership in Canada from aboriginal people who have some really good ideas about the things that we can do to reduce poverty and to give our aboriginal children of the future the best chance they can get.

The Chair: Thank you very much. I'll have to close it down there.

I want to thank each and every one of you for taking the time to come and speak to us today. There were a lot of very good questions, a lot of very good answers, and I think a lot more questions to come. Thank you very much.

Thank you to committee members. We will be breaking for lunch and coming back into this space for our second round.

•(1210)

_____ (Pause) _____

•(1245)

The Chair: Good afternoon, everybody.

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2), the HUMA committee is continuing its study on poverty reduction.

We're very pleased to have our second round of witnesses here in Maple Ridge, B.C., hosted by the venerable MP Dan Ruimy.

I apologize for getting started a bit late. We will get started immediately and hear from all of our witnesses.

From the City of New Westminster, we have Lorrie Williams, councillor. From the Community Education on Environment and Development Centre Society, we have Christian Cowley, executive director, and Teesha Sharma, youth services director. From the Co-operative Housing Federation of British Columbia, we have Thom Armstrong, executive director. Finally, from the Multicultural Helping House Society, Marius Alparaque, program coordinator, pre-arrival and post-arrival programs. Welcome to all of you.

I will be giving each of you seven minutes to introduce yourselves and tell us why you're here. Once we're done that, we'll have questions, obviously, for everybody.

To start us off, from the City of New Westminster, we have Councillor Lorrie Williams. Welcome.

Ms. Lorrie Williams (Councillor, City of New Westminster): Thank you, and thank you for not saying “minister”, but rather, “minster”.

There are two things you don't do in New Westminster. You do not say “New Westminster”, and you don't turn left at Sixth and Sixth.

Voices: Oh, oh!

The Chair: I'll take your word for that.

Ms. Lorrie Williams: If you come to our town, we'll shake our umbrellas at you if you do that.

Thank you for this opportunity to address you today. I think this is a very important task force and I'm awfully glad that the government has set it up.

A few months ago a man came to our council to speak at the open delegation segment of our meeting. Our citizens are afforded five minutes. It's a risky move, but I'm proud of my city's courage in allowing an open mike.

This man was almost in tears as he described his situation. Both he and his wife had low-paying jobs and had been managing until he became a victim of a rent eviction. His rent was going to be almost double and he could not find any other affordable accommodation in our city. He desperately wanted to stay in New Westminster, near his work as he had no car, and where his children went to school. This is an example of some of the challenges facing the working poor. This is why New Westminster has made a real effort in poverty reduction, and this is why we have developed a real poverty reduction initiative.

We were the first municipality in Canada to institute a living wage bylaw in 2011, and we are considered to be a municipal leader in the areas of child care, homelessness, and housing affordability. Despite these efforts, however, poverty remains a pervasive issue in New Westminster. We cannot do it alone. We need the support of senior levels of government.

I will share with you our numerous strategies because you have asked specifically for suggestions on how to reduce poverty.

It started, as all municipal things do, with the formation of a committee tasked to develop a strategy. As a result, 29 municipal actions were identified as directly addressing the needs of people, including families, who are living in poverty and with low incomes. These actions include, first, a living wage bylaw that ensures that municipal staff and contracted workers are paid enough to meet basic, locally calculated expenses.

I'm going to give all of these to the committee so I'm hoping that you'll be able to use them. We're very proud of them.

Second is an affordable housing reserve fund and two small sites for affordable housing projects. Third is a secure market rental housing policy. This is to prevent people from changing our rental units into condos. It's not allowed in our city. Fourth is a tenant relocation policy in 2015, and a rent eviction action plan.

Fifth is a rent bank program, and I'll just stray a bit to tell you that Judy Darcy spoke yesterday in the legislature about the rent bank that New Westminster has set up with the help of our local credit unions. This, of course, is to allow people who are going to be late on their rent to come and get money to cover their rent.

Sixth is a child care grant program and a reserve fund. Seventh is having a community and social services asset map for people in need to find out where to get help. Eighth is a newcomer's guide that acts as a resource to newcomers during the first six months and after arrival. There's even a parks and recreational subsidy program and an affordable active living.... We give very cheap swimming lessons, skating, whatever.

Now, this is the thing that we're most proud of. Our full poverty reduction strategy contains 70 actions, which you can find in the reports that I have shared with you. I have made copies for the entire committee.

In addition to the strategies, a chief consideration is to raise community awareness regarding poverty and its impact. As a means of building support for its implementation and to reduce the stigma associated with poverty, the committee prepared "Poverty Mythbusters", a document. Each week we put one of the myths into our local

paper so that people can read and understand what poverty is really about.

● (1250)

Given that I now have the ear of the federal government, I will say what an important role you have to play, as you are best positioned to reduce systemic barriers contributing to poverty. You have the resources to initiate policies, programs, and services, to raise people, including families, out of poverty.

Many of the issues are beyond the jurisdiction or the scope of municipal government and its community partners. We have only eight cents of every tax dollar. That's all that's going to municipalities. You're asking too much of us. We are struggling with infrastructure deficits, provincial downloading, and an aging population.

Please, develop a national housing strategy, and give us more money. I assure you, we will spend it wisely. We interact daily with the problem. We know what to do. Just help us to do it.

Thank you.

● (1255)

The Chair: Thank you very much. I'm sure there are many questions milling about in the minds of our committee members right now with all these fantastic strategies.

From the Community Education on Environment and Development Centre Society, Christian Cowley and Teesha Sharma, the next seven minutes are yours.

Mr. Christian Cowley (Executive Director, Community Education on Environment and Development Centre Society): Thank you very much, Chairman May.

Today we have two things to ask of the federal government. One is to create a specific and distinct strategy for youth homelessness, and the other is to directly fund long-term youth shelters and housing for the reasons we will be revealing next, in terms of lived experience.

My colleague, Teesha, has lived every aspect of the youth homelessness that we're going to be talking about today. She has suffered through it all and come out very strong, as we believe every one of the youths who are currently in the situations we're going to describe can, within one year of us finding them in their situations.

We're actually going to speak about two distinct populations. The first is children aged 13 to 18 who land on the street, usually at the age of 13 or 14. The second is youth who have not gotten there yet. If we have that long-term housing and shelter there for them when they land on the streets, they will not encounter these situations.

I'm going to turn it over to Teesha to describe some of her regrettable experiences.

Ms. Teesha Sharma (Youth Services Director, Community Education on Environment and Development Centre Society): I'm just going to open by saying thanks a lot.

We spent the morning listening to a lot of facts and statistics, and seeing how things look on paper. The reason I am really grateful to be here—nervous as hell but really grateful—is that I want to be able to provide you with a sense of how it actually feels, what it actually looks like, and how things actually play out, because I think a lot of that tends to be put into a nice report, and we lose the human side of things. I will be providing the analysts with some of that. Feel free to ask, if you have questions after this.

Mr. Christian Cowley: We have 16 youth on the street here who are living as sex slaves or gang tools. Usually the story is that they have trauma at home, usually abuse, or torture in some cases, and they are brought to the notice of a provincial ministry that then tries to put them into foster care. That usually fails because sometimes the foster care homes are also traumatizing for these youth. Then, they are offered services that they're not able to use because of their trauma.

We often hear the terms “trauma-informed approaches”, or “trauma-informed care”. It seldom actually takes place.

I've met with the ministry and they've given me a long list of wonderful programs that these youth are supposedly given, and then there are the youth who refuse these services. The reason they refuse them is that the programs do not take into account their trauma and the things they've faced.

It could be something as simple as going to a ministry psychological counsellor and being asked by the counsellor to close their eyes in a room with a person of the same sex as their abuser, and then being cited as being non-compliant and told, “Don't come back.”

Abandoning youth.... Even when we do give them housing, the list on the website indicates about six or eight different services that they get. They don't get those services. This is the situation that these youth face.

The typical story we have in writing for you. We were able to get that done. It wasn't in time for translation, so we hope you do get this document later.

A typical pathway for one of these youth...and we have eight girls and eight boys. Teesha is in direct contact with all of them.

• (1300)

The typical path is that a youth experiences significant trauma at home. This can be anything, including torture—literally. People take bets with their friends on torturing their kids. This goes on. This is true. The scars and bruises finally get noticed. A good teacher can

find them. The ministry gets notified about the youth, and the ministry lets them down in many ways. The youth becomes homeless and is thrust into survival mode. They hit the street at the age of 13 or 14. They are then targeted by a predatory adult who gives them clothing and warmth and food for about a month before they switch the youth into being a sex slave by grooming them.

The youth encounters multiple barriers to accessing resources and support. Their need for belonging and protection continues to increase, and is actually exacerbated by their ongoing trauma. They are groomed by that predatory adult. They are usually introduced to illegal substances and then become dependent on them. They become dependent on that predatory adult for some aspects. They are also literally imprisoned by them. They are blindfolded when they are transported to clients' homes. You'll see them wearing sunglasses. There's a blindfold under those sunglasses.

Their mental capacity diminishes under this kind of treatment. They've long lost any kind of trust in adults. Anybody coming to them with services is not likely to be believed. They don't have the skills or resources to have the capacity to change their circumstances individually.

Ms. Teesha Sharma: I'll give you a little bit of an idea of what happens. I many times had to go through this cycle where my dad would break one of my bones and I would get sent to an emergency shelter. You can stay there for seven days, but you cannot be in that shelter during the day. We don't have any emergency shelters in this area, so they were often sending me to the Downtown Eastside without support during the day. You can go back to the shelter and try to sleep for a few hours each night, but after seven days you're discharged back into homelessness. You try to find another youth shelter that has a bed, but they all are operating at capacity because the need is so great.

What kept happening to me in my situation—it's what happens to a lot of the youth I work with now—was that I would get sent back home many times after seven days of respite, and then something worse would happen at home.

That cycle just continues and continues and continues until you stop telling anybody what's going on. You just live with it until you either commit suicide or you....

Our youth don't have options. I just want people to start thinking about “seven days”. If you have something that is catastrophic or damaging happen to you in your life, and then you're told that you have seven days in a shelter of some kind and then it's over, I think we can all agree that those seven days won't be enough to get anything fixed in your own life or to change anything.

Mr. Christian Cowley: In 2014, with the change in policy of the homelessness partnering strategy, all support for youth shelters was terminated. It went exclusively to the housing first policy, which I laud highly, but we have zero resources for youth in our community. There is no food source for which they are eligible unless they are 19 or older. There is no shelter.

There are, I think, 23...?

Ms. Teesha Sharma: There are 20 low-barrier beds in all of B.C., and they are operating to capacity every single night.

• (1305)

Mr. Christian Cowley: There are only 20 beds for all of the Lower Mainland, which has two million to three million people. Our youth homelessness segment for this age group alone, between 13 and 18, is 16 in a population of 100,000.

Ms. Teesha Sharma: In thinking about youth homelessness, the biggest thing that we need today, and that we're asking you guys to do, is to fund long-term housing, somewhere that youth can be supported. They need that instead of being thrown into apartments by themselves. I went through that. It led to six years of social isolation and suicide attempts.

The biggest way the federal government can help right now is to follow the precedent set by the skills link and new horizon programs, where you bypass the transfer payment system and go directly to community-based organizations that have the ability to reach these kids, develop relationships with these youth, and then support them as they go through and transition into adulthood.

That's what I would really like to see happen.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

At the beginning, you thanked us for being here. I speak for all of us in thanking you for being here. Lived experience is something that... It's hard to encourage people to come out, so I thank you for having the courage to be here to speak to us today.

From the Co-operative Housing Federation of British Columbia, we have executive director, Thom Armstrong.

The next seven minutes are yours, sir.

Mr. Thom Armstrong (Executive Director, Co-operative Housing Federation of British Columbia): Good afternoon. Thank you very much for the opportunity to be here.

I am with the Co-op Housing Federation of B.C. I'm also the CEO of Community Land Trust foundation of B.C. There are 14,500 non-profit co-op homes in the province. We're tied into a national network of 92,000 non-profit co-op homes. Our Community Land Trust holds about 226 million dollars' worth of assets in land and housing. We welcome the work of the committee and hope to contribute some practical suggestions for your consideration, which will be followed by a written brief with a few more facts and figures.

I guess I don't need to spend very much time on the link between the cost of housing and poverty. That's been pretty well established by some of the briefs I've seen. I was struck by some of that material when it dealt with the notion of how expensive poverty is. One estimate I saw was that it is over \$7 billion a year to the health system. Imagine investing half of that amount in an affordable housing strategy.

In Canada today, we have four million renter households whose median income is less than \$36,000 a year. One in five of those renter households spends more than half of their gross income on housing, which means they are foregoing other necessities of life and not disposable income. In B.C., we have just over half a million renter households. The median income in that cohort is just under \$39,000 a year, and almost a quarter of them spend more than half of their income on housing. That's because the disconnect between housing markets and household income is systemic. In Vancouver,

between 2001 and 2014, wages went up 36%; homes values went up 211%. In the last three years, the median wages for renters have increased on average 6.5%, and rents went up 11%. This situation is not improving. This is a structural issue. I haven't even included the cost of homelessness in those numbers, which some people estimate at more than \$7 billion a year.

No wonder there have been repeated calls for a national housing strategy. The traditional response to that has been either capital grants or operating subsidies into new development or existing housing, either directly delivered by CMHC, or in a call to shovel money to the provinces with few or no strings attached. It might seem odd for someone from a co-op, a non-profit housing community, to be saying this, but I'm not here to ask for a return to the 1980-style housing expenditures. That just creates legacy obligations for the federal government that strand assets and equity in assets that were created 30 years ago.

What I want to suggest we do is to imagine what it would mean to redeploy the same level of investment to create better outcomes. We have a Community Land Trust foundation today that has 358 homes under construction in the city of Vancouver on land that we've leased for 99 years. When those homes are available within the next year, the average rent will be affordable to people whose income is 70% of median income and getting better over time. One in five of those homes will be available to people in the lowest-income quintile of our population. The outcome will be safe, secure, mixed-income housing, serving singles, families, seniors, and people with special challenges. They will be affordable in perpetuity because of our non-profit structure in our corporate charter. The best news about that development is that once it's rented up, the ongoing cost to government in subsidy to that housing will be exactly zero.

What if that model could be replicated on a larger scale? We're already making attempts to do that. We have projects in the pipeline in Surrey, North Cowichan, Vancouver, and we hope very soon here in Maple Ridge. I think there's a basis there for a federal strategy based on a social innovation that I think is quite remarkable.

I thought a bit about what I might suggest as a set of criteria that you might apply to whether or not the government should invest in housing, and I think you might want to think about these things. It should be uniquely federal. It should complement but not replicate what provinces ought to or are doing. It should be scalable. It has to respond to the real need and demand out there. You can't build a housing strategy around demonstration projects. It should create partnerships between government, community, and the private sector.

Above all, and I think this may be a real departure for the co-op and non-profit housing sector, is that we want to argue that the investment that the government makes in housing should be returned to the government over time. That's how we're going to use government capital to leverage that investment and attract private and community capital to the challenge of building affordable housing.

•(1310)

We think those solutions are available now. If you want to think of it this way, there are five major drivers to address if you want to have an impact on housing affordability. There are capital costs; that's the upfront equity that developers invest if they think they can make a 15% to 20% return after they've evaluated the risk of a particular development. There are financing costs, the long-term debt that's required to amortize the initial cost of building that housing. There's land, and in Vancouver that can be up to 40% of the cost of any new development. Then there are construction costs, and included in those costs, GST or HST and other levies. Finally, there is the cost of operating that housing over time.

The basic metric that I think you should bring to bear on this is that in order for a housing development to be truly affordable to people across the kinds of income cohorts that we're talking about, 40% of the equity in that housing either has to be given or lent to it over a very long period of time at a very low cost.

Of those factors, which are ripe for federal impact? I think there are two areas of low-hanging fruit here. One is land. Everyone talks about transferring federal surplus land into housing and no one ever does it, but in a community land trust, the transfer of federal surplus land for housing development would immediately reduce by 20% to 40%, depending on the market, the cost of developing that housing. And if it were vested in a community land trust, it would keep it affordable in perpetuity.

As for construction costs, I mentioned our Vancouver land trust development. By the time we're ready to rent up, we will have paid the federal government \$3.6 million in GST. To put that in context, the cost of that debt is about \$57,000 a year for every million dollars being paid in GST.

Access to upfront risk capital—long-term, patient, low-cost capital—those are the kinds of solutions that we think could be delivered. Say, you were ready to invest in short- and long-term equity funds, and a financing fund that would mature at around \$2 billion a year, which coincidentally is what CMHC is now spending on ongoing federal subsidies for housing that has already been built. At maturity, a short-term equity fund pitched around the \$2-billion mark would provide us with 40,000 to 50,000 affordable rental units a year, which is enough to address the estimated supply needs.

It's important that this asset be vested in a community land trust so that it would remain non-profit and affordable over time, something *The Globe and Mail* in its article yesterday called a speculation-free zone, which I think is a perfect way to describe the return on the investment to government in making that kind of housing strategy central to its focus.

I would welcome the opportunity to speak in more detail about this with you, but I think the opportunity exists here through financing mechanisms that are right now on the table to create a legacy for federal involvement in housing that's affordable across a wide demographic in perpetuity.

I want to thank you for your time today.

•(1315)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Now from Multicultural Helping House Society, we have program coordinator, pre-arrival and post-arrival programs, Marius Alparaque.

Mr. Marius Alparaque (Program Coordinator, Pre-Arrival and Post-Arrival Programs, Multicultural Helping House Society): Thank you very much. I am honoured and privileged that I can share our story with you.

Mike Cayetano, the executive director and vice-president of the Multicultural Helping House Society, was supposed to be here, but late last night he sent me a message that his dad is undergoing surgery, so he cannot come. I will be winging my story with you. I might ramble a little, but I will try to share it succinctly.

The core value of the Multicultural Helping House Society is to help newcomers. We are a settlement service organization. We are located on Fraser Street and have been in operation about 20 years—20 years last year. The president and founder of this society is Mr. Avendaño. He turned 88 this year, and he's still very bright, energetic, and dynamic in dedicating his life to helping others.

Talking about our programs.... As you know, since 2014 Filipinos have been the number one source of immigrants. We have overtaken the Chinese and the people from India. We are growing in numbers all over Canada, and we're approaching a million soon. With the total population of Canada being 35 million, we're about 2.8% of the population.

Last year, the federal government, Immigration Canada, granted us some funds to start a pre-arrival program in the Philippines. At first, we tried an online program, enriching and preparing Filipino visa holders who are coming to Canada for what life in Canada is like, their opportunities, understanding employment readiness, and all that. Since we started, and up to the middle of this month, we have served about 6,480 visa holders coming to Canada. They are scattered all over the different provinces. We have 20% to 25% going to Ontario, about 20% going to Alberta, and about 15% to 18% going to Manitoba. Here, in Vancouver, it's about 10% to 12%, and Saskatchewan is a big number as well. What I'm trying to describe is that, with the effective pre-arrival program, we have a continuum of service in helping the new immigrants as they settle in Canada so that their integration is smooth and they can settle their family quickly.

We are a multicultural society, so we also help other immigrants, from different countries. We also help the refugees who come to our doors, because we have a respite unit. They can stay there temporarily until they find employment.

Over the years, the people who have come to our door and whom we have reached out to have had different stories. Our program is not only settlement, but also programs for the community: for the youth, the seniors, and the caregivers. I mention the caregivers, because it is a unique group of the population that I think we have overlooked. Over the last 10, 15, or 20 years, we have brought into Canada live-in caregivers...and the whole temporary foreign worker program.

●(1320)

But when we created that opportunity, it also brought with it problems. I say this because when they come in they are not allowed to bring their family with them, and that has created problems that you are now trying to fix. The people who are here first are mostly women separated from their families for five or six years. When they arrive, relationship problems surface. After five years they are able to sponsor their families, and when they come, the kids are already teenagers. The husband may or may not come. We see in this situation fractured families because of the trauma of separation.

We're looking at huge numbers of people in this situation, and right now we are seeing the effects of it. Caregivers have brought in their families. Most of those caregivers are successful, even though they have sacrificed their quality of life by working two or three jobs to bring their family. But the trauma of separation and fractured families still has to be addressed. I say this because of the need created by the mental health issues that are brought on by this situation, the economics, and the high drop-out rate of the youth from our schools. We are trying to catch up. The Multicultural Helping House Society is doing its best to do some preventive measures by enhancing our services in the Philippines and also in the settlement programs here.

Where I'm coming from is, in our society today there is a group of people who need a lot of help. Mental health issues have been brought up where counselling is a must. Areas of employment preparedness, education, and career preparedness are issues. Housing is an issue.

This is just a story that I am sharing. I'll tell the story of Edward. Edward had worked all his life as a nurse here in Vancouver. One night I got a phone call from St. Paul's Hospital and was introduced to Edward. Edward was in the hospital because he had a stroke. His family abandoned him, he had to go to a shelter, and he needed somebody to pick him up and take him to the shelter because mentally and physically he wasn't able to do that. The following day, early in the morning, I went to pick up Edward from St. Paul's Hospital and brought him to a men's shelter on Dunsmuir.

Edward then called me, and he was really upset. He said, "Marius, can you please pick me up? I cannot stay here". I asked, "Why?" He said, "During the day, I cannot go to my room and at night I cannot sleep. There are four or six people in that room. I'm sleeping in a cot. I cannot sleep. I'm stressed. Can you please get me?"

I picked up Edward and took him to respite housing at the Multicultural Helping House Society. As soon as he got there, his whole countenance just changed and he felt at home. Edward stayed with us for about a month, and then he decided he would go to the Philippines so he could get proper care there. I'm sharing this story because what we do impacts a lot of lives in our community and across Canada.

●(1325)

I just came from Toronto, Winnipeg, Calgary, and Edmonton, seeking partnership and collaboration with the immigration service organizations and societies in Toronto and those areas, and I am very glad to say that we are now working well. I refer to them the clients we have who are going to Ontario and all these other places. This is

the thing that I would like to see and would like to have our federal representatives look at, because it's a real problem that we need to address.

Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Starting us off with questions this afternoon is MP Warawa.

Mr. Mark Warawa: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to witnesses for being with us today, particularly Teesha. Thank you so much for sharing with us a little of your experience, and I'm glad to see that you're now through that part of your life and successfully moving on and helping others.

My focus today is going to be as much as possible on seniors. We have a massive demographic change happening so quickly in our Canadian population. Over the next six years we'll go from one in six Canadians being seniors to one in five, and in 13 years it will be one in four. If we don't prepare for that, we are going to have a homeless problem like we've never seen in Canada. Seniors need to be shown respect and dignity, especially in their later years.

Another premise is funding. We've heard requests for funding throughout the study on poverty reduction. All levels of government struggle with that, and if you increase funding for a program, it has to come from somewhere, either reallocating the money, taking it away from this program and putting it to that program, or increasing taxes. To increase taxes is always the choice of last resort.

Councillor Williams, you shared the story about a senior gentleman and in that story, if I understood it correctly, the rent was about to double. Mr. Armstrong, you alluded to rents going to go up 11%. I did a quick check online and in British Columbia there is a maximum that rents can go up. In 2013, the maximum was 3.8%. In 2014, it was 2.2%. In 2015, it was 2.5%. In 2016, it was 2.9%, and this year it's 3.7%.

I have a primary residence but when planning for the future I also bought an investment property, a townhouse, and my strata fees, maintenance costs, and taxes keep going up way more than that, but the maximum I as an owner, as a landlord, can raise rent this year is 3.7% and that makes it really difficult. Each year I get a little further behind. I subsidize that even more out of my pocket. That's a struggle as a landlord and in encouraging more and more people to invest in that.

Councillor Williams and Mr. Armstrong, where do those figures of doubling and 11% come from? Because in my experience, that cannot happen. Could you elaborate?

Ms. Lorrie Williams: I think I can. Renovations are different. When the developers buy a rental building, they will encourage everybody to move out because they're going to do all these marvellous renovations. Consequently, they are told that because of the renovations, they are not allowed to move.... They can come back, but because of the renovations it's like a new apartment, so they encourage them to get out. They will pay them one month's rent and some moving expenses, but most people don't want to leave their area. They want to come back, but when they come back, they're not coming back to the same apartment, theoretically. Now they're coming back to a new building.

•(1330)

Mr. Mark Warawa: That would have to be with the approval of a building permit, and a redevelopment plan approved by the City of New Westminster in your case. Is that correct?

Ms. Lorrie Williams: That is true. Developers are allowed to do this, but we want a change in the B.C. Residential Tenancy Act so that anybody who is evicted because the landlord is going to do all of these extensive renovations must be allowed to move back at the same rate, and the landlord must be allowed only the going rate of increase.

Mr. Mark Warawa: What New Westminster is proposing is that millions of dollars could be spent on a building to upgrade it, to make it safer and more enjoyable, but they could not increase their revenues from that property. Is that correct?

Ms. Lorrie Williams: That's correct.

But they don't lose out; the profits just aren't as great. The people who were living there beforehand should be allowed to stay, and through attrition, when they leave, then they can bump the rent up as much as they like.

Mr. Mark Warawa: It probably would not encourage redevelopment or encourage spending a lot of money to make the building more enjoyable if the person does not see a return on that investment. If they borrow that money from a bank and are not able to see an increase to pay that back, I think it would really discourage....

Am I wrong?

Ms. Lorrie Williams: No, I think the developers.... These are not people who own the building now. They are usually developers who come in and their aim is only profit, and that's it.

The Chair: Thank you.

Now we have MP Ruimy.

Mr. Dan Ruimy: Thank you very much, everybody, for being here.

Again, Teesha, I'm glad we could get you guys in today.

I'm going to start off with Thom. As you well know, I'm a big fan of what you're doing. I think to be able to build low-income housing without money from the government, without waiting for any government to help you out, using those private funds and assets that you have is a fantastic idea. The only question I have at the start is why this is not happening everywhere. Why does this seem to be a bit of a secret?

Mr. Thom Armstrong: I think it's that we're still trapped in that old model of government-based subsidy, either capital grants or long-term operating subsidies, which were the norm for the better part of 30 or 35 years. In today's market that's absolutely the most expensive way to deliver affordable housing, because it relies on a single funder, the government. I just don't think that's realistic anymore.

We heard in the previous question a great description of the central dysfunction in the private rental market. But that math changes if the owner of rental properties becomes a non-profit or community land trust whose only purpose in existing is to keep housing affordable in

perpetuity. To just put our hands out and wait for government to fill it with money is not a realistic approach to developing affordable housing anymore. Government money has to be leveraged to bring private equity and community equity into the equation.

We've spoken before about New Market Funds, which is a for-profit equity fund, the basis of which is five charitable foundations putting money into the entity. They've put \$11 million into our land trust development in Vancouver. That's patience equity. It comes out in eight to 10 years, but in the meantime it makes the debt coverage ratio on the conventional debt much more attractive to a traditional underwriter, and that gets the housing built.

When the housing becomes more affordable over time because more of the initial debt is paid down, we can take the equity investor out at a reasonable, but not full, market rate of return and then refinance the property to make it more affordable.

Housing will never be more expensive than it is on the first day the door is opened. After that it just becomes more and more affordable over time. If you can overcome the need for initial risk capital through a combination of government and private equity, you can do a lot.

We put \$4.5 million out, at risk, on the land trust development before we had a single shovel hit the ground, and none of those costs were avoidable. We'll spend a lot more in costs that are avoidable if something doesn't change in the equation, that relationship between government and the private and community sectors.

•(1335)

Mr. Dan Ruimy: Okay. If I understand correctly, let's say you want to come here to Maple Ridge. Do you buy the land or do you go to the city and say, "Hey, we have a proposition for you"?

Mr. Thom Armstrong: Our first port of call would be the municipality to ask if they have municipal lands that they could partner with us on in whatever corporate form they think makes sense. That will automatically, depending on the market, reduce the cost of the equity required by 15% to 40%.

Mr. Dan Ruimy: Does it cost the city anything?

Mr. Thom Armstrong: Only the cost of the legal advice to put the partnership together.

Mr. Dan Ruimy: Are there long-term operating costs?

Mr. Thom Armstrong: None.

Mr. Dan Ruimy: Nothing to the city...?

Mr. Thom Armstrong: No.

Mr. Dan Ruimy: Nothing to the province...?

Mr. Thom Armstrong: No.

Mr. Dan Ruimy: Nothing to the federal government...?

Mr. Thom Armstrong: No.

Mr. Dan Ruimy: Wow, what's the problem there?

Mr. Thom Armstrong: I think the great thing about it is that it's not one and done, right? The problem I have with all the old subsidy models is that you spend the dollar, but you never get the dollar back. In this model, the money is recycled. It's not a grant. It's not a subsidy. It's an investment. That money comes back over time. The capital has to be patient in order for it to work, and then it gets recycled into the next affordable housing project. To me, that's the magic in the equation.

Mr. Dan Ruimy: How could the federal government help you in this land trust? What role could we play here?

Mr. Thom Armstrong: CMHC's \$2-billion annual subsidy or operating expenditure is going to sharply decline as those 35-year operating agreements expire. My advice to the federal government and to CMHC would be, don't spend more than you've already been spending. Take that money and create a short- and long-term equity fund and a financing fund that could be made available to community-based groups who've shown they have the capacity and shown that they can actually deliver on the ground, and use it to de-risk the housing proposition for private equity partners who can come in early and stay late. It would be a game-changer in Canadian housing policy to have those kinds of equity funds available to us.

Mr. Dan Ruimy: Excellent. That's outstanding.

You heard testimony from Christian and Teesha on the challenges that our youth face here. Can you play a role in that? Is there something that you can do with your land trust here?

Mr. Thom Armstrong: Absolutely. I was so touched by some of those stories. That's what we're doing now in the Vancouver development. One of the four sites is going to be operated by Sanford Housing Society. They have a long track record of providing housing to people challenged by mental illness. On its own, that project in the 1700 block of Kingsway would not be viable, but in a land trust portfolio, backed by the other assets in the land trust, we can accept a lower operating revenue from that building on Kingsway because we can generate a bit more operating revenue from the project that's going to be right along the river, on Kent.

A traditional co-op or non-profit housing project is really a one-off development. It stands or falls on the viability of its individual pro forma, but if you can aggregate assets in a portfolio and take a portfolio approach, not only to developing the housing but to managing it, stewarding that asset over the long term, you can create a level of deep and continuing affordability across sites, across demographics, and across user groups that you can't possibly achieve project by project on the old funding model.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Now over to MP Sansoucy, please.

[Translation]

Ms. Brigitte Sansoucy: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I thank all of the witnesses for being here with us today. I also want to extend special thanks to Ms. Sharma, since her journey requires a lot of courage.

My question is for Ms. Williams.

I would like you to share the process and approach that led to putting in place all of the initiatives you outlined for us. Were there

public consultations and partnership and cooperation with the organizations? How have all of these initiatives worked out concretely speaking?

• (1340)

[English]

Ms. Lorrie Williams: We set up our own task force on homelessness. I can't remember all the people, but faith-based organizations, churches, social organizations, everybody who had anything to do with poverty was invited to the table, including, of course, councillors. Through public consultation, many of the initiatives were brought out, and we have staff go out and have open houses on certain issues. Otherwise, I can say that our council is made up of like-minded individuals. We have hired a senior social planner, who's sent from heaven, I think, and he has guided our city into a very caring position.

I think that's how we were able to do it, especially the living wage, because people thought this was going to be doom and gloom. What's going to happen to everybody? The living wage is \$20.64 at the moment. That means basic needs are met by a family, including even ballet lessons for your child or something like that. People have accepted these things. We're quite lucky.

[Translation]

Ms. Brigitte Sansoucy: That's very interesting. I will certainly look for more information on this.

Yesterday, we met with some people from one community who told us that in order to obtain results they had to think outside the box. I worked in the community sector and I know the usual way of thinking, which is that when there is a subsidy program, the organizations fight to obtain money.

Yesterday, the people from that community told us that there is now a new paradigm. They sit down together in order to see how best to use the available sums of money. Sometimes an organization will even say that it has money it won't be using, and then the various organizations together examine how another one of them could best use those subsidies.

Based on your experience working with various organizations, do you think that we have to rethink how we establish programs in communities, and design a mechanism to ask them how they want to get organized to meet their needs and find their own solutions?

[English]

Ms. Lorrie Williams: Yes, we have an ongoing homelessness coalition, for instance, and it is funded by the city. We provide the secretarial support, and everybody sits around the table like this and we actually decide, if there is money and if there are grants, where they are best spent. Sometimes it's seniors. Sometimes it's whatever. I would say that in our city we have co-operation among almost all our organizations, and they look now to the city for guidance. We're very lucky that way.

[Translation]

Ms. Brigitte Sansoucy: I was struck by something yesterday.

When we see innovative ways of doing things, we tend to think that we would like to see them brought in everywhere in Canada. However, we know that the realities and living conditions are very different from one community to another. In addition, various levels of government have to work together. You will have heard the previous witnesses speak about that challenge.

In light of your experience, what can we put in place to ensure that the municipal, provincial and federal governments work better together in order to obtain results for the citizens they represent?

[English]

Ms. Lorrie Williams: You know, we were very pleased, for instance, when the idea of a rent bank came up. We brought this idea to our MLA, and she ran with it and did the work for us and got it all set up with the credit unions and then announced it in the legislature. This was the co-operation, I think, that was necessary in our city. Our homelessness coalition, for instance—I always go back to that because I'm a member on this particular one—includes everybody, and I think also our member of Parliament is very accessible and available to come to any of our meetings and share.

Also, one thing is for sure; as you said, not every municipality or every area or every problem is the same. I'm willing to borrow any suggestion from anybody if it helps. This is why I brought all this. I'm willing to share. I don't believe in reinventing the wheel.

• (1345)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Now we'll go over to MP Dhillon, please.

Ms. Anju Dhillon: I will be sharing my time with MP Ruimy.

I have only one question. It's for Teesha Sharma. Can you please tell us how you overcame the adversity that you faced in your life and how you are where you are today?

Ms. Teesha Sharma: After being cycled through youth shelters and being homeless and all of that, I was put in an apartment on the ministry's agreement. I had been diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder. I spent six years in complete social isolation because I was out of physical harm, but I was.... You know, the things that my parents and their friends did were extensive.

It was six years, multiple suicide attempts, a lot of self-harm, and then I got to this one moment where I was pretty much ready to end it for the final time. What I learned is that it's actually harder to do. Physically, it's harder to kill yourself than the media may portray. I had three methods lined up, and I was about to do it. I got to this

moment, and I just realized that if I did, my parents wouldn't have just taken away those years that I had lived, but they would have taken away all the years to come.

The next day I left my apartment for the first time in I can't say how long, and looked into ways to go to school to change the way that we work with youth. I did that. I graduated as valedictorian and then literally went to every organization. I wanted long-term housing for youth. I basically knocked on everybody's door and told them my story and what I wanted to do, and then I met Christian. He was the first one who said, "I don't know how I am going to help you, but I will find a way to do that." It was finding that support .

It was also knowing that right now there are still 16 youth on the streets in Maple Ridge who are feeling the same way. I guess, to be honest, I just wanted to find a way so that no other kid had to feel every single day like they were worthless.

When we lost Iron Horse, that was really hard. Iron Horse was the only youth shelter in B.C. that allowed you to stay for a month, 30 days. It was the only time that I actually really slept. In all the other ones, I couldn't do it because I didn't feel safe. It took a couple of weeks to start to build up trust with somebody else, but it was that long-term...and having a youth worker kind of advocate.

It's so hard now to do this job knowing how all those kids feel. I think what makes it worth it for me, though, is just having to believe beyond anything else that there is a better way to do this. We have to step up and share our stories and share the actual hard truth, even though it's hard for people to hear. I think that's the only way that things are going to change.

I think that's kind of what got me to where I am now.

• (1350)

Mr. Christian Cowley: If I may, with regard to the 16 youth who are there, we can't get them out of their situation because there's nowhere to take them. We need a safe house and a long-term shelter.

Ms. Anju Dhillon: I want to thank you, Teesha, wholeheartedly, and on behalf of the entire committee. Thank you for showing the courage and helping others in the community, and helping those who are going through what you went through.

I'll let Dan....

Mr. Dan Ruimy: Sure, leave the last bit to me and on that note.

I don't have a lot of time, but I want to make some comments here.

I've heard time and time again that there's no money, or, "If you spend money here, we have to raise taxes." I don't buy that. That, to me, is an excuse. The reality is that we spend more money trying to clean up the messes we have.

What I don't understand is why governments can't figure this part out. You invest in youth mental health, you invest in the people who are not privileged, because that's what it comes down to. We have people who do well and they are part of a privileged class. They can go to a good school. They can have what they want. There are way more people out there who are not part of that privileged class and we seem to be okay with ignoring them. That's not acceptable to me.

I don't have a lot of time left. Christian, we've talked a lot about Iron Horse being shut down. Quickly, summarize the challenges of trying to get another youth shelter open.

The Chair: Very quickly, please.

Mr. Christian Cowley: A youth shelter is licensed to house only five youth at a time, with one emergency bed. It costs about \$300,000 a year to run a youth shelter like that. To suit the population that we know is here on the streets, we need three shelters. One of them needs to be a safe house; that is, the address is unknown to the public.

Ms. Teesha Sharma: I think that funding is probably the biggest thing, and to also, as I said earlier, really give that opportunity to community-based people. For the most part, community-based programs don't really have access to funding for something like youth housing right now. It gets put in people's hands, which goes back to convenience, in some ways, as opposed to moving forward and creating something new that has a better potential to work.

The Chair: Thank you.

MP Long, please.

Mr. Wayne Long: Thanks, Chair.

Thanks to our presenters this afternoon.

We're here as a committee, obviously, to hear from you and to come up with ideas for recommendations that we need to make to our government, our minister, on poverty reduction.

I thought I'd start with you, Mr. Armstrong. Put yourself in our shoes. In a minute or less, tell me how you would proceed if you were us. What recommendations would you immediately make to our federal government to improve the lives of those living in poverty, short term and long term?

Mr. Thom Armstrong: I would do three things right away.

The first is a direction to make federal lands available for community land trusts to develop new housing.

The second would be to waive the GST or HST on new affordable housing developments so that it doesn't go straight onto the debt service of that housing.

The third would be to create an equity fund to partner with the community and with the private sector to invest in the development of affordable housing to reduce that cost between housing and income.

Mr. Wayne Long: Marius, if you don't mind, why don't you give me your recommendations? What do you think we need to do, short term and long term, strategically as a federal government?

Mr. Marius Alparaque: In addition to what Mr. Armstrong has said, we are a country with a lot of resources. We have been selling our birthright since the beginning. When I say selling our birthright... our logs, our natural resources are sent somewhere else. They process them. They come back to us as value-added goods.

I think a cradle-to-grave approach should be taken. We know how many people we have—immigrants coming in, babies born. Why don't we invest in the basic need of housing, like the idea of pre-engineered homes, the accessibility of lands? We could provide not only housing but also employment, if we were to expand the value-added goods, products, and services we provide.

• (1355)

Mr. Wayne Long: Thank you.

Councillor Williams, our mayor in Saint John—Rothesay is very supportive of poverty reduction and is very passionate about it, much like you are. Obviously, there's only so much a municipality can do. It has to do it in conjunction with the province and the federal government.

From your standpoint in New Westminster, what do you recommend we do? What would be one of the first things you feel we should do in a national poverty reduction strategy to help your city?

Ms. Lorrie Williams: Everybody talks about a national housing strategy. That's the first thing that we would want. Something that, for sure, would help us to do things like that—and yes, land. That would be wonderful, especially for New Westminster.

Encourage a living wage. You know that we're not talking about snowbirds here, who take their money and spend it down in the United States. People on a living wage stay local and spend local, stimulate the economy, keep things going.

A new look at unemployment insurance, I think, would be a big help to us, too.

Mr. Wayne Long: How many people, Councillor, in your city are on a wait-list for affordable housing?

Ms. Lorrie Williams: I'm sorry. I do not know that.

Mr. Wayne Long: Do you know how often that list turns over? Are people on it for years?

Ms. Lorrie Williams: I'm sorry. I don't know that answer. We have developers put in purpose-built rental and subsidized housing, and they go along with it, because in the Lower Mainland, as you know, housing is a big item. They put those in, and we have no shortage of people who snap them up.

Mr. Wayne Long: Are you seeing benefits in your city of the Canada child benefit?

Ms. Lorrie Williams: Absolutely. I think any amount of money left in people's hands is spent on what they need, and anything we can do to increase that would be good.

Mr. Wayne Long: Thank you.

Mr. Cowley and Ms. Sharma, again, your presentation and your story are very heartfelt and moving, I think, to all of us, so thank you for your story.

What can we do? We had a youth shelter in Saint John called Safe Harbour, which was closed due to some funding issues. I was new as an MP at that point, and I was very frustrated because, from a federal government perspective, there was really not a lot I could do. From a federal government perspective, Mr. Cowley and Ms. Sharma—whoever wants to answer that—what can we do to immediately help your situation?

Ms. Teesha Sharma: I think one of the biggest things that would be helpful would be.... We do have the MCFD, the ministry at the provincial level. There is a bit of a perception, I would say, that our kids can't fall through that because that's a safety net. I think that creating streams of funding outside of just giving.... What's happening is that those programs have so many barriers to access that their capacity.... They have a certain thing they work toward, and in a lot of cases they're very capable of doing their job, but there are youth who are experiencing barriers to those programs and they're being forgotten. To have a stream of funding that would allow community-based organizations to create something without barriers, that's what we need right now. I think that would be really helpful.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Now we go to MP Vecchio, please.

Mrs. Karen Vecchio: Thank you very much.

I'm going to start with Marius. Just yesterday, when we were in Medicine Hat, we discussed a bit the Immigrant Access Fund. It's a fund that can be used by new immigrants coming into Canada to upgrade, a prior learning assessment tool. What is the uptake in your community of using that fund?

• (1400)

Mr. Marius Alparaque: It will be a great opportunity. If that fund is available, newcomers can immediately invest into career development and schools because they are already here.

Mrs. Karen Vecchio: Is it being used right now? It has been here since 2005. How many people would be aware that it's there and actually applying to get the funding?

Mr. Marius Alparaque: As I said, in the month of January alone we had about 2,000 new immigrants just from the Philippines, and that can be expanded to the other countries. About 50% of them are primary—they are older, the father and the mother. The rest are dependants.

Mrs. Karen Vecchio: Lorrie, I don't want to make this a political question by any means, but when we talk about living wage.... It comes up so many times, and it's something I have problems getting my head around because of my own philosophy. When we look at the living wage, I have a couple of questions. Right now it's \$20.64. Prior to putting that in, in 2011, how many people were below that minimum amount?

Ms. Lorrie Williams: Actually, very few.... It's more of a social statement, as well.

Mrs. Karen Vecchio: That's what I'm asking, because we find that the municipal, federal, and provincial governments usually have it higher. A lot of times what happens is that people try to set it there as leadership, but what we find instead is that there is going to be an increase in taxes. That's my next thing. It's a small thing. How much did that increase?

That's why I said that I don't want to make this political. How much did that increase their human resource cost when you went from implementing the average cost to where you are now? It would be very little, because people were already making that living wage.

Ms. Lorrie Williams: We had a few people like shelvers in the library, part-time and things like that, students—

Mrs. Karen Vecchio: Would it be 5%?

Ms. Lorrie Williams: Yes, even less. But contractors who wished to work with the city and on a city project had to have their workers—

Mrs. Karen Vecchio: Okay, their workers had to have that.

Ms. Lorrie Williams: Yes, and it actually didn't discourage too many flag people on the street.

Mrs. Karen Vecchio: Okay, I want to ask some more questions. Since you studied that prior, what were the statistics on how many people prior to getting the living wage were underneath that—

Ms. Lorrie Williams: I don't know that number, but I know it's very small.

Mrs. Karen Vecchio: Okay.

I'll move on. Teesha, honestly, I know it's really difficult when we talk about your story. I dealt a lot with human trafficking and a lot of would-be violence against women and sexual violence within my own community, and brought this year the Shine the Light project to Ottawa, which was shining the light on women's violence. I thank you so much. What you've gone through is absolutely traumatic. What we find is there is such a lack of resources.

Within my own community, I work with a national leader, Megan Walker, on this and she does a lot of work on prostitution, sex trafficking, everything like that. It's devastating. Were there resources here for you when it came to needing that?

Ms. Teesha Sharma: [*Inaudible—Editor*]

Mrs. Karen Vecchio: There were no resources.

Lorrie, maybe you will know this. Within our community is there a plan to have those resources available? Is there somebody who has come to the community saying, we need to do this. Is that in the vision?

Teesha, I want to know. Is there a plan to make sure that we have something to protect our women from violence. Are there appropriate shelters being built or focusing on sex trafficking?

Ms. Lorrie Williams: The answer is yes. We have a very good house and we have a new one going in, and we have second-stage housing going in for women as well.

Mrs. Karen Vecchio: Awesome. That's fantastic because we do need these types of resources.

Thom, I really appreciate what you brought forward. Do you have a business plan showing exactly how this model works? Do you have something that you can share with the committee?

Mr. Thom Armstrong: We do, and I'd be happy to share it. Our initial seed investment came from Vancity credit union, and the model that we're following is complete self-sufficiency within four years from start-up, so we're halfway through that now. We think the revenues off the new developments will fund entirely our activities.

Mrs. Karen Vecchio: Okay, fantastic. Since I don't see the red light on, I'm coming back to Teesha.

Teesha, in your situation of course it's very difficult. What can we do to help our youth who fall into the horrible situation that you did? You are that shining light right now for many people because you have that empathy. What can we do to help others who are engaged in the same situations, whether it's family violence or something even worse than that? I can't think of anything worse. What can we do?

• (1405)

Ms. Teesha Sharma: You can adopt trauma-informed practices, but I think that a lot of people use that as a kind of token statement. It sounds really good to say we do trauma-informed...but when we look at the reality of the situation, we're failing to do that. When we're sending a youth who was sexually abused and raped by multiple people to a male counsellor, who then asks her to close her

eyes with her back to a door, and when she can't do that, tells her that there's no point in her coming back, it's bad.

Mrs. Karen Vecchio: What a brick wall.

Ms. Teesha Sharma: It's the system and the barriers that we're putting up that are excluding so many people because it is hard to understand what it actually feels like to be in that situation.

When you're a youth trying to access things and all you keep hearing is "no" or "you can't do this" or "you have to be like this to get this kind of service", every time you're denied, and every time you're turned away, that's contributing to your getting to the point where you're not going to seek help. You're going to stay where you are because you don't see the value in it.

Mrs. Karen Vecchio: The door's being shut just one too many times.

Ms. Teesha Sharma: Yes.

Mrs. Karen Vecchio: Thank you for being here, and thanks for having that mind thought that staying alive for many more years is what's best, because you're definitely worth it.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you to all of you.

This whole experience, travelling across the country and meeting front-line people who are dealing with this every single day is, I think, really critical to the success of this study. Please keep up the good work. Keep fighting the good fight. We're going to do what we can on our end not to come down and lead the way but maybe to lead from the side and support and fill the gaps where needed.

We are going to have to move fairly quickly since we do have another site visit.

Thank you, everybody. The meeting is adjourned.

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