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Chair: Mr. Bob Bratina



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• (1100)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Bob Bratina (Hamilton East—Stoney Creek, Lib.)): I call this meeting to order. I see we have a quorum.

The first meeting of 2021 of the Standing Committee on Indigenous and Northern Affairs is now under way. Of course we start with the acknowledgement that we're meeting on the traditional unceded territory of the Algonquin people, if we're in Ottawa. In my location it is the territories of the Haudenosaunee, Anishinabe and Chonnonton first nations.

[Translation]

Good morning, everyone.

[English]

Once again, to ensure that the meeting is properly conducted and moves smoothly for our guests—and we have one guest ready to present—we have to make sure that the translators can hear to properly translate. That means you select the language you wish to speak on the little interpretation globe at the bottom centre of your screen. Make sure it is on English. If you choose to speak French, of course, you select the French one. When speaking, ensure that your video is turned on, and please speak slowly and clearly. Those who are not speaking should have their microphones on mute.

Our first meeting is under way. Joining us by video conference for the first hour is Deputy Grand Chief Jason Smallboy of the Nishnawbe Aski Nation.

Jason, welcome to our committee meeting. You have up to six minutes for your presentation. Please, go ahead.

Deputy Grand Chief Jason Smallboy (Nishnawbe Aski Nation): Thank you, everyone, and good morning.

My name is Jason Smallboy and I am one of the deputy grand chiefs of the Nishnawbe Aski Nation, or NAN. We're a political territorial organization that represents 49 first nations in northern Ontario, the majority of which are accessible only by air or winter road. Thirty-two of our treaties are considered remote.

I want to talk to you about issues surrounding food. The cost of living in our communities is much higher than, say, that in southern Ontario. While our general day-to-day costs of things such as utilities, food, etc., are higher than those for our southern counterparts, the cost of food is astronomical in comparison. For example, the price of milk or baloney or bread at a convenience store in Ottawa would be considered cheap in our territory. Our people are paying

close to two to three times the prices in a convenience store in Ottawa for basic staples and necessities.

A little over a year ago, before the pandemic, I attended a climate change conference in Whitehorse, Yukon. While I was there I went to a grocery store to purchase some fruit and snacks for myself and I noticed that the prices for the groceries were about the same as in southern Ontario. I have to ask, how is it possible to have the same prices in Whitehorse as in Ottawa? If this is possible, then that tells me it's possible for us to make some major changes in the NAN territory on the price of food.

The high cost of food is not the only issue in terms of food security. The food that is available tends to be highly processed and unhealthy. Our members face moderate to severe food insecurity as they are unable to access or acquire foods that are healthy and acceptable. Access to healthy food in our communities is a significant barrier for all.

Purchasing significant healthy food to sustain growing families is impossible for many, primarily because of the cost. Many rely on imported foods, which are extremely expensive and often nutrient-deficient options that further contribute to poor health outcomes. Because of the high unemployment rates in our territory, the majority of our families are forced to purchase and consume these unhealthy foods, which leads to our communities being disproportionately affected by poorer health outcomes.

Despite pleas from our community members and academic studies by external bodies, there has not been any substantial government support. This situation has been exacerbated by the pandemic, limiting food availability and further driving price increases. The most vulnerable in our communities have been greatly impacted, as a healthy diet becomes further out of reach for their families.

A significant and sustainable change is needed. We must re-envision food systems and food governance within our nation, because what has been made available through government funding and initiatives to address food security in the north simply isn't working. Simply providing subsidies on food will not address this issue. We support a system change, placing emphasis on the traditional culture of food within communities and the significant role it plays in not only physical health outcomes but also mental health outcomes.

We understand that land-based foods play a critical role in the diets of many, but these practices are becoming a luxury for many families who do not have the means to go out on the land or for those for whom the knowledge of country foods has been lost. Our communities are eager to make change for themselves, but they need financial support so that they can acquire equipment such as rototillers needed to create gardens, infrastructure such as storage facilities and community-owned stores.

There is a growing concern about the safety of our traditional foods as environmental factors play a larger role than ever. Many have noted changes in the migratory patterns of animals, and others have become aware of areas once thought to be safe that are now too polluted to safely harvest from.

• (1105)

Now, more than ever, there is a great awareness of how first nations in the north experience great inequality in providing healthy and culturally acceptable foods for their families. The pandemic has made the gaps in the current system glaring holes, leaving many vulnerable and significantly impacted. Experiencing constant fear of food insecurity is traumatic, demoralizing and unnecessary. We, as a nation, seek to move forward and find solutions to create resilient and sustainable food systems for our people.

In closing, I want to let everybody know that we have been working with nutrition north Canada, and together we have been looking at possible solutions that will address many of the issues. But we need your political will and support to implement these solutions that will result in real change. Also, financial resources are needed to put the changes into action. By making these resources available, our people will be impacted directly and our communities can begin to move to healthier states so that we can bring our people to the same state the rest of the country enjoys.

That is my opening. I'm here and available to answer any questions that any of you may have.

Thank you.

• (1110)

The Chair: Thank you so much, Deputy Grand Chief. It's an excellent beginning to our meeting today.

We'll go to our round of questioners. First up is a six-minute round. I have on my list Mr. Melillo, Ms. Jones, Madam Bérubé and Ms. Blaney.

Mr. Melillo, would you please go ahead for six minutes.

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

Thank you to the deputy grand chief for joining us today. Those opening remarks already gave us a lot to think about. I trust that as we move through the questions, we'll have much more to work with. Let me say that it's an honour to be able to speak with you today, as I represent the riding of Kenora and many communities that, of course, you also represent with your organization.

One of the things you mentioned was the winter road system, which is obviously very important for many of the remote communities in my riding. We know that with the changing environment

and the warmer winter—every day but today has been relatively warm in our region—the seasons are shorter. They're expected to be shorter. They're already causing some significant issues in winter road availability for many of these northern first nations.

I have heard recently from some chiefs in my riding that they're actually going to be appealing to the federal government to, hopefully, get some support to ensure that the winter road system can be maintained and optimized, especially given the shorter season they have. Of course, as you know, if their goods aren't being driven up, if food is not being brought up through the road system, it's being flown in at a much higher cost. I'm wondering if you could speak a little more about the importance of that winter road system and ensuring that it's as viable as possible for those remote communities.

Deputy Grand Chief Jason Smallboy: Thanks for the question.

Yes, it's true that the winter road network that we have in our territory is vital to the delivery of goods to the community, especially fuel. In my experience, when I was working for NAN as a staff member about 10 years ago, we had a meeting. I think it was with the ADM for INAC at the time. Members of many of my communities came to our office, and we met with them. They were concerned that they weren't going to be able to fly the fuel in that was needed for a year-round supply of energy to their communities.

During that meeting, they mentioned that just to fly in the fuel cost half a million to a million dollars. They really wanted to avoid those kinds of costs. When a community doesn't get all the fuel that they need, they have to fly it in. Then, when that happens, a lot of the communities have to pay for it out of their own pocket through other programs or whatnot within the community. That puts a financial strain on the planning of where that money should have actually been used.

When that happens, as well, it creates even more strain on the first nation because the communities only have so much money that they're provided with to run these programs and services and so on. When there are added costs due to not getting enough fuel up to the community because of the winter road conditions, then it creates more strain.

I'm just using fuel as an example because of my experience with that situation. The winter roads play such an important role in NAN. I know when the winter roads are set up, even on the James Bay coast, a lot of communities during the winter road season go down south to do a lot of their shopping. They buy in bulk. I know a lot of people take trucks and just fill them up with basic staples, like toilet paper for example.

There's definitely, I would say, a need. Our communities are looking for cheaper products that they use day-to-day, which people living in an urban area get to enjoy every day. It's something that people in urban areas don't really need to think about.

I hope that answers your question.

• (1115)

Mr. Eric Melillo: Absolutely, thank you.

Chair, I hope I have time for one more.

The Chair: You have about a half a minute. I'll give you a minute and a half. How's that?

Mr. Eric Melillo: That's more than generous. Thank you. I will ask quickly.

You also mentioned the fact that there are obviously a lot of unhealthy foods that are being brought to these communities. There's not really a focus from the government on supporting traditional harvesting. I'm just wondering if you could go into a bit more detail on some of the programs or some of the ways that we might be able to help assist with culturally appropriate and traditional foods.

Deputy Grand Chief Jason Smallboy: A harvesters support grant has been made available. I think we need to create more programs and services that encourage our people to be more out on the land. The way it is right now, a lot of people can't afford to go out on the land. It's starting to become a luxury even though a lot of our people are craving it and asking for it.

I'll tell you a story about a program the community started in Moose Cree First Nation in Moose Factory called Project George, where a couple of community members got together. One of them was the former deputy chief, whom I've known for quite some time. He takes kids out on the land, mainly youth at risk, and he teaches them a lot about our culture, our ways, our traditions. He told me one time that he hadn't heard from this kid. He went to his house and told him to pack his things, that they were going out to the bush for a couple of days. The kid was hesitant at first. He said he didn't want to go, but that guy was really persistent. He said to come on, we'll just go and have a good time. The kid gave in and went with a group of other kids, and that kid who was hesitant told the former deputy chief of Moose Cree that if he hadn't come and taken him out to the land that day, he would have committed suicide that night.

That's an example that shows how our people are craving to go back out on the land. One way or another, a lot of families just can't afford it. There is a lot that is being lost and is not passed down the way it used to be.

• (1120)

The Chair: Chief, I'm sorry to interrupt.

Deputy Grand Chief Jason Smallboy: That's all right.

The Chair: We're way over time on that question, but that's fine. The story was very important for us to hear.

Just so you know, the reason we have a time frame around our questioning is that there's a cycle of questions so that everybody gets a chance to ask you their question. I let you go on, but that was a really great story to hear. We had a police officer in Hamilton

who took youth at risk into the woods for two or three days of camping with a similar effect.

Ms. Jones, it's your turn now. You have six minutes. Please go ahead.

Ms. Yvonne Jones (Labrador, Lib.): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Deputy Grand Chief, for joining us today. I really appreciate your taking the time to inform our committee about the challenges around food security in your area. To give you a bit of context, I represent the northern riding of Labrador. I grew up in an isolated, remote community so I understand very well the challenges you're dealing with.

I have a couple of questions. First of all, last year we introduced the harvester support grant through the Government of Canada and obviously being an indigenous person in remote Canada I've seen first-hand how the benefits of that program have helped so many families. I'm wondering if you guys were able to launch that program this year and what your thoughts are around it. Is it contributing to reducing some forms of food insecurity in your community?

My second question would be this: The Government of Canada has a number of programs and grants that are responding to food security across northern regions. I'd like to hear from you what you think we should be doing more of or doing differently that could really help with food security in your community. I know that through COVID money, your first nations would have received funding. I know that some of that funding in my area went to food security and heat security programs. What feedback did you get on that from the people you represent?

Deputy Grand Chief Jason Smallboy: I do believe people have been accessing the harvesters support grant, which is good. We definitely need to have more people able to access other kinds of funding as well. I know that when I travelled to my communities and met with the workers who were working at the band office, a lot of the time they talked about trying to raise money to take more youth out onto the land. There definitely still is a need there.

I'll just let people know that about a year ago, we had submitted a proposal to Environment Canada. We wanted to basically pay people from our communities to go out on the land to track things like climate change and the differences they see out on the land. I thought I would just mention that.

The second part of your question was about what we should do. As I said, we've been working with nutrition north on trying to come up with some real solutions and some things we can do. One of the things we're finding out is that a lot of the companies get the subsidy for nutrition north before the products are sent to the communities. I guess what's happening there is that the food may not make it to the community as quickly as possible, and it may go bad while it's sitting somewhere in storage, let's say. That is maybe something we should look at and maybe change. Make the subsidy available in the community rather than to the company before it has even shipped anything.

Another thing is to make sure that these companies that receive the subsidy are more accountable. When you look at the pricing in the north—for instance, when you go to the Northern store—it shows how much you spend and how much of the subsidy is applied. You can barely even notice it. About two years ago when I was in Fort Albany, I went to the store to buy just two six-packs of English muffins. It cost me nearly \$12. That was with the subsidy included. That just gives you an example of how expensive it is in the community.

I hope that answered your question.

• (1125)

Ms. Yvonne Jones: Thank you very much for the response.

Mr. Chair, do I have enough time to ask another question?

The Chair: You can get the question in but not the answer. You have about 30 seconds.

Ms. Yvonne Jones: Okay.

Deputy Grand Chief, I appreciate your feedback. It's not uncommon to what I've heard from others in terms of whether the subsidies are being transferred and how it can be monitored a little differently. I certainly appreciate the feedback from your area as well.

Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Thank you very much for your consideration.

[Translation]

Ms. Bérubé, you have the floor for six minutes.

Ms. Sylvie Bérubé (Abitibi—Baie-James—Nunavik—Eeyou, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Chief Smallboy, thank you for appearing before this committee and telling us about what you're going through.

I represent the riding of Abitibi—Baie-James—Nunavik—Eeyou. So I am also on Cree and Anishinabe territory.

I heard everything you said about your communities and what you are experiencing with respect to food safety, high unemployment and pandemic solutions.

You also talked about the systemic change that is needed. Can you tell me more about what you need in terms of that change?

[English]

Deputy Grand Chief Jason Smallboy: One thing I wanted to mention today is that I would like to do a study in our territory to look at maybe two or three different models that could be imple-

mented, realistic models that we can use, whereby we can get communities taking more ownership of food security in the territory. We would need some financing, obviously, to do these kinds of studies, but really, right now what we've been doing is trying to address the issues as they come up.

It has been really difficult on families during this pandemic as well. We at NAN have been doing all we can and are trying to work with the companies in the territory to make sure they have enough supplies for the communities. It's difficult. Right now, we would have to consult with our people to look at what are realistic solutions that we can do now and into the future to make life better for our people.

[Translation]

Ms. Sylvie Bérubé: How are your communities involved in the initiative to address food insecurity in your region?

[English]

Deputy Grand Chief Jason Smallboy: A lot of our communities are basically looking for funding. They may get funding here and there from different pots, from different sources and whatnot, to do these little projects like, say, gardening. A couple of years ago, I was in a community where they had a community garden. A lot of the community members were involved. It was really good to see, but like I said, a lot of these approaches to funding are project based.

You get so much funding to do this small project for maybe a year or two or three, but nothing that is really for the long term. We received funding from FedNor recently to do a project for about a year to help us with other areas on food. That right there is for only about a year or two. We need more longer-term funding so that we can even have staff members, people to look at and work on these issues in the community, because a lot of times you don't have a staff member dedicated to work on food issues.

I know that for a long time at NAN our director of food was basically working on it part time. She had other responsibilities. That's the reality in a lot of our communities. Our resources are very small. You may have one person in a community who works on three or four different issues. It becomes very much a strain on that person. In an ideal world, we would like to have teams working on all kinds of different issues: environment, food, youth and recreation, and things like that. Unfortunately, there's not enough funding, and there are not enough resources to hire these people.

• (1130)

[Translation]

Ms. Sylvie Bérubé: Do I have any time left, Mr. Chair?

[English]

The Chair: You have 30 seconds.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Sylvie Bérubé: Thank you. I will ask more questions soon.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you very much. We go now for six minutes to Ms. Blaney.

Rachel, you have six minutes. Go ahead.

Ms. Rachel Blaney (North Island—Powell River, NDP): Thank you, Chair.

I want to thank you, Deputy Grand Chief, for taking the time to be with us today and for sharing this really important testimony.

For my first question, you talked about the reality that many of your people are having moderate to extreme food insecurity and that there's an incredible need to revisit the food system. The way it is currently is simply not working is what I think you said, and subsidies are not the only solution. There really needs to be a system change.

You also talked about the nutrition north program investing in subsidizing food companies rather than the local community. Could you speak to that? I'm just wondering if there's any interest in looking at ways in which there can be an increase of local food production or in bringing those businesses to the community, so that it benefits and also improves food security. I'm curious about that. Thank you.

Deputy Grand Chief Jason Smallboy: I was speaking with one of my chiefs before the holiday about a lot of the issues around food. One of the things that he proposed we could do is use his community as a pilot project for the nutrition north subsidy, because what he told me—this is for Fort Severn, by the way, the most northern community we have in NAN territory—is that a lot of his people are ordering products now online and they're getting them delivered directly, so they're not even shopping at the local store. It's cheaper for them to order it online and get it delivered than it is for them to actually shop in the community. That was one idea you can look at to make the subsidy different. He said he would even be willing to share that information with anybody who would want to look at making that change for their community, and even with government agencies as well.

There are a lot of people and community members up there who want to start doing their own gardening. Like I mentioned before, a lot of the funding that we get is project to project, so when I was talking about that lady at NAN who was doing food issues part time, she had a program going where she would gather up a lot of seeds and instructions on how to plant those seeds and how to maintain them, and send those to the community. It was just to try to give people the supplies and maybe some of the knowledge and some training on how to maintain that.

Like I said, the need is there. It's just that there's no real sustainable funding to last long term. Say a community gets really involved with gardening. When the project ends and they don't find any funding to maintain it, they lose that interest. Say then, there are kids involved in it. They may move on and go to post-secondary and it may take two steps back again in trying to get more people involved. You're restarting the cycle over and over again. It's

frustrating. I think it happens a lot in terms of trying to get projects going in the communities.

• (1135)

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you for that. That was incredibly helpful. The other thing that you talked about earlier was the issues around food insecurity and the results that has on mental health. I know that you talked very clearly about the pandemic and those gaps already being there, but this has certainly made them even bigger and very easy to see. I'm just wondering if there are any supports for folks to address the mental health concerns that you're seeing happen due specifically to food insecurity.

Deputy Grand Chief Jason Smallboy: We at NAN saw that there were a lot of issues regarding mental health during the pandemic, so we started a hotline. It's called NAN Hope. We promote it very regularly and we offer it in all the languages in the territories, so Cree, Oji-Cree and Ojibwa. We started that support and we go on the radio twice a week with the radio station that we have available in our communities, which is Wawatay. We mention every time we go on the radio that we have this Hope line in place so that people can reach out—even me too. I've been on the radio a couple of times talking about this and I encourage a lot of our people to really get the help that they may need.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you so much. I appreciate that.

The Chair: Thanks. We're at time now.

We go to a five-minute round and Gary Vidal will be up first.

Gary, just so you know, I have the Beauval coffee cup on this blizzardy morning in Hamilton, thinking about your cold weather forecast.

Go ahead for five minutes, Gary.

Mr. Gary Vidal (Desnethé—Mississippi—Churchill River, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Just so you know, we had a road trip planned to that beautiful community tomorrow, which now is delayed because of some of the wonderful weather we're having.

Deputy Grand Chief, I want to thank you for taking the time to be with us today. Your comments and your suggestions have been more than helpful. They've been very positive, and I appreciate your solutions-based approach.

I want to pursue that idea a little more. You talked in your opening comments about working on solutions for the nutrition north program and trying to get political support for some of those solutions. I know that in answering the other questions you've already provided some of those, but I want to expand further on what some of those solutions look like so that we can give you that political support.

I want you to do it in the context of maybe thinking a little outside the box and maybe outside the existing government programs and some of those things. Are there some creative ideas you have that could be included in the discussion?

The reason I go there is that the area you're talking about—that area of northern Ontario—is so incredibly similar to the riding I come from in northern Saskatchewan. I had the privilege of being in Mr. Melillo's riding in that area. It's very similar. One of the things we have going on in my riding is a discussion around taking a soon-to-be-expired mine and turning it into an underground greenhouse, whereby there's going to be an opportunity to create some food supply and some food security right in northern Saskatchewan.

With that being a bit of a preface, I'm looking at whether you have some ideas that are very much solution-based ideas and that may be a bit outside the box as well. I want to get your input on that. You've offered some really good stuff already, and I guess I just want you to expand on that.

• (1140)

Deputy Grand Chief Jason Smallboy: All right.

Some of the discussions we've been having with our chiefs in NAN territory are about looking at maybe creating co-ops and centralized distribution centres. For the northwest area of NAN, say, the main hub would be Sioux Lookout, and for the James Bay area, it would be Timmins.

There has been some talk about getting interested in a community co-op and maybe having it kind of owned, I guess, by the members. One of the ideas I heard from one of my chiefs is about somehow creating a system whereby the profits don't really go to an outside organization, but rather to putting more in savings so that the customers and the community members are the ones who get to see actual savings on how much the products are in their community. That's one suggestion. It's one discussion that I've had with a couple of my chiefs.

Again, as you know, it would take some research if we have to look at which kinds of organizations and distribution centres to work with. I think that would be needing some funding for us, the first nations, to get this thing off the ground.

Mr. Gary Vidal: Thank you for that.

In your earlier comments, you talked as well about some of the supports that would be needed to improve or expand on the traditional, cultural land-based types of things. You threw out the idea of rototillers and some infrastructure for buildings. Does that include greenhouses? Could you talk a bit more about the kinds of investments that might be necessary to expand on those more traditional or cultural practices?

Deputy Grand Chief Jason Smallboy: Sure.

I would say that infrastructure is a big one, which we would welcome in a lot of our communities, I'd say, because right now a lot of our communities are at capacity with a lot of their buildings. In some communities, you would even have to look at making upgrades to the water system, the sewage system, because that may be at full capacity as well.

There's a lot of infrastructure that would be needed, including in looking at trying to get greenhouses going in the communities. Then, if we were to do that, if we were to build greenhouses, we'd have to come up with a way to have somebody look after them as

well. I don't know if it's through the band office, say, or maybe through education somehow. Maybe we can make it a part of.... I'm not sure how that would look, but we would definitely need dedicated people who were focusing on just this issue in the communities.

The Chair: Thanks, Chief. That brings us to time there.

Thanks, Gary.

Now Marcus Powlowski, you're up for five minutes. Go ahead.

Mr. Marcus Powlowski (Thunder Bay—Rainy River, Lib.): Thank you.

Hello, Jason. It's nice to see you. I want to get into some specifics, and it might seem like an odd question, but I think a lot of people from down south don't really know much about what happens in your communities.

I remember—and this was more in Yvonne's territory—one Christmas in Nain, being invited to someone's house and having boiled turkey. I'm not sure if it was boiled potatoes or it was bannock in homebrew. I don't think this guy had much money. Obviously in any community there are going to be variations as to what people can afford.

Jason, could you just give us an idea, what, in your communities for someone who has more money and for someone who doesn't have much money, would be the average thing someone would eat for breakfast, lunch and dinner, and how much that would all cost if you were to buy it at the Northern store?

• (1145)

Deputy Grand Chief Jason Smallboy: I would say it varies by the location. The more north you go, the more expensive it is. I will start off with a story. I happened to be in one of my communities on the first of the month, which was social assistance day. I was staying there for a couple of nights and I had just finished work. I went to the store to buy myself some snacks for the evening and I just happened to look in people's baskets. I noticed that a lot of the people were buying a lot of foods that come in boxes, like chicken fingers and other kinds of frozen food that you throw in the oven. It didn't look healthy at all but that was mostly what everybody was buying. That's because it's really all people can afford. It's cheaper to buy those kinds of foods than it is to prepare a healthy meal. Say if you wanted to cook bacon, eggs and toast with some fruit, I don't know how much that would cost exactly, but it wouldn't be cheap. It's not like it is down south where you can buy fruit that's already cut up for about three or four dollars and maybe just throw that on as a side. The eggs may be three or four dollars down south too, so you have to triple that price. Just for, say, a dozen eggs, you could pay anywhere from \$10 to \$12.

I also mentioned earlier that fresh fruit is not really available. One time when I was in Moose Factory visiting, I went to the grocery store and I bought a loaf of bread. When I got to where I was staying, it was mouldy, so I couldn't even use that. That's just an example of what it's really like up in the north.

Mr. Marcus Powlowski: Having lived for a couple of years in such communities, I have spent a lot of money at the Northern store and have had to pay whatever they were charging, four or five dollars, for a head of lettuce and those kinds of prices. Obviously in a lot of these communities, Northern store basically has a monopoly. There's no real competition. Do you think their prices are fair? I mean when you have a monopoly you can charge whatever you want and people basically have to pay because they don't have much of an alternative. What do you think of the prices that Northern stores are asking for their products?

Deputy Grand Chief Jason Smallboy: I'm going to give you an example to answer that question. In the community of Moosonee, which is on the James Bay coast, which is right next door to Moose Factory, there is an LCBO there and the prices in that LCBO are exactly the same as in downtown Toronto. When you go to the grocery store, as I said, the prices are two or three times more than what they are in the same area in Toronto. I have to ask, why is it that way? Why is alcohol the same price yet groceries are two or three times the price?

That's just something that a lot of people have actually been talking about lately. If that is possible, then how come we're not having the same prices of food at our grocery stores as they are in southern Ontario?

The Chair: Thanks very much, Deputy Grand Chief.

Madam Bérubé, you have two and a half minutes. Go ahead, please.

• (1150)

[*Translation*]

Ms. Sylvie Bérubé: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

We are talking about food that is not healthy at all. This is incomprehensible, given what you pay for these foodstuffs. The prices are completely different in Toronto or elsewhere.

What could the federal government do to ensure that you have access to traditional foods?

[*English*]

Deputy Grand Chief Jason Smallboy: The way it used to be in the old days was that when our people went out to the land for harvesting, and let's say hunters got a moose, when they got back to the community they would share that with the elders. That still happens today, but as I said earlier, a lot of people can't afford that. Why don't we look at creating something around that, where we can get people to go out on the land? A big thing about our culture is sharing. That's one of the key things even in our understanding of the treaties. When our people go out onto the land and they come back with their gatherings, a lot of people share that with a lot of community members. It could be elders or it could be somebody who is not physically able to be out on the land.

There is still a sense of community in our territory. We just need more supports and we need to find creative ways to keep people out on the land while still making a living.

I hope that answers the question.

The Chair: Thank you. It does.

Madam Bérubé, we are right at 10 seconds. Thank you.

Next we have Rachel Blaney for two and a half minutes.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you, Chair.

Thank you so much for this. Deputy Grand Chief, you spoke earlier about the need to build capacity within the communities. You talked about the reality that you keep having to start again and again, and about not being able to keep that momentum up because of funding constraints. I'm just wondering if we could get some clarity about what the gap is. Obviously, the gap is consistent funding, but does NAN need resources to have someone focus solely on building capacity to address food security? How would that best be managed through your region?

Deputy Grand Chief Jason Smallboy: Absolutely, we could definitely use more human resources at NAN to help address these issues. Right now we have a couple of projects going. We have somebody who may be looking after a certain project in NAN for all of NAN. They may have to look at other issues that may arise as well. It puts a lot of pressure on our staff. You have these obligations that you have to meet and that you get your salaries from, and then you have to also work on trying to address long-term issues in the community. It's tough. If we had the people that they have at various ministries—I don't even know how many staff they have—that would be ideal. That many people could focus on a lot of issues like food insecurity and look at realistic solutions.

There's one thing I want to share. I heard from a councillor one time, from the community of Attawapiskat, and she told me that when a community goes through a crisis, and then another crisis, and then another, and then another, it feels like you're trying to come up for air. She said it is really hard. That got me thinking: How are you going to plan for the future when you are living day to day? We definitely need more people to look at long-term solutions, the way that—

• (1155)

The Chair: Thank you. That's a very interesting way of expressing it.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you.

The Chair: We have five minutes now with Cathy McLeod.

Cathy, can you go ahead?

Mrs. Cathy McLeod (Kamloops—Thompson—Cariboo, CPC): Thank you.

Thank you for the very interesting testimony today. Often we have three panels of witnesses but I think we're getting a much more in-depth opportunity to have a conversation with you today, so I really appreciate it.

Certainly, there are a few things that you said that, of course, are stunning: The price of the English muffins just took me aback a little bit, and the fact that the Liquor Control Board prices are the same.... You said something about the Yukon. Have you done any sort of thinking in terms of a population base? Why do you think the Yukon was more similar in its prices? That would be my first question.

I've been around long enough that I saw the food stamp program that I think was deemed to not work, and we now have nutrition north with many gaps and flaws. I'd like to understand where your conversations have been going with the government in terms of what needs to be done to.... I don't think we'll ever get to perfection, but to do better anyway.

Deputy Grand Chief Jason Smallboy: Right now we're really looking to see if there's any way we could try to make programs more effective, so we're doing a lot of exploring right now. I think we need to have more people on the first nations' side to help look more into these issues as well.

We've been having conversations with nutrition north for quite some time. I've had a couple of face-to-face meetings as well, just to let them know these are some of the problems that we're facing in NAN territory. I'm liking where those conversations are going. I'm not sure what it takes for the government side to give approval. That's where I try to ask people, "Okay, so if we're working towards this common solution, what can I do to help move things along?"

That's why I said earlier that we'll be looking for political support, and some finances. Once we start looking at trying to make changes to these programs that are having a minimal impact, then we are going to need everybody to start saying, "Okay, here are some solutions we came up with. Let's do it. Let's put it into practice."

Mrs. Cathy McLeod: When you talk about the conversations, are these formal, regularly scheduled meetings? You talked about needing more indigenous people as part of the conversation.

Can you talk a bit further on that piece?

Deputy Grand Chief Jason Smallboy: Yes, we have a staff member of NAN who's been engaging with nutrition north and we're trying to get more people in NAN territory to talk about it more, but like I said, we need more resources. We have just one staff person, and that's all we have on the NAN side. We're really trying to capture, as best as we can, what the issues are and to look at solutions so that we can pass that on to nutrition north as well. If we could, I'd like to start having more open forums like this, even with our leadership, so that we could start talking about what it is that they would like to see.

I mentioned a little bit about what the communities have been saying so far, but I think we need to start really engaging with the communities more. As I said, we just need more resources for that as well.

Mrs. Cathy McLeod: Nutrition north has been probably—what?—eight years now in operation, maybe a little bit more. I might be dating myself.

Would you say there has just been some minor tinkering in spite of concerns? How would you describe any changes that have been made since concerns were identified?

• (1200)

The Chair: Answer just briefly, please, Deputy Grand Chief.

Deputy Grand Chief Jason Smallboy: Yes, I do see that there are some changes coming or that have happened in the past. They

may increase the subsidy for, say, flour a little more, but then, getting back to the accountability, what's to stop a company from raising the price even more so to offset the subsidy so that they don't lose any profits and whatnot?

The Chair: Thanks so much for that.

We have one more questioner for five minutes. Jaime Battiste is next, and then we will suspend for the next part of our meeting.

Mr. Battiste, please go ahead.

Mrs. Cathy McLeod: Thank you.

Mr. Jaime Battiste (Sydney—Victoria, Lib.): Thank you, Chief Smallboy.

In my conversations with some of the people and the friends I've have had over the years at NAN, one of the things they've talked about is the importance of a harvesters support grant and traditional food and traditional hunting and fishing.

I know that the hunting and fishing aren't just about food. This is about culture. It's about the transition of knowledge.

Can you tell me what are the typical foods they are hunting and fishing up there? Also, are they within the means of conservation? If we created more funds for more hunting and fishing, do you think the stocks and conservation in that area could handle it ?

Deputy Grand Chief Jason Smallboy: Yes, for sure. In our territory, we have moose and caribou. Honestly, I've had both, and I prefer caribou. I find it's delicious. Also, there's a lot of fishing that goes on.

When I was working as a staff person for NAN, we had a men's healing program. We worked the programs so that we did a lot of the work out on the land. We went ice fishing in one community with some participants, and we had a facilitator there who talked about the mental health part of it. We found that to be very effective. When we were getting our evaluations back, they were going up.

Every time we had an event in the community, we would go out on the land. We would go camping and sit by fires. We would go out on the lake or that kind of thing. At the same time, we were addressing the mental health issues and looking at maybe some of the traumas that some of the people had experienced.

We created a safe environment for our people. We had this program and we found it to be very effective. One time when we went ice fishing we caught some fish, and when we got back to the community, the participants said, "We have to give this to the elders." So that's what we did. That's why I said that. This practice is still being done today. I saw it back when I was a staff person at NAN, which I thought was very lovely.

Mr. Jaime Battiste: I think that's one of the indigenous values that we all have coast to coast. If we have more, we give to the elders first.

I'm interested in your solution around the co-ops. I'm hearing that in the Northern store there may not be as much accountability and transparency to the communities in terms of the prices. Can you tell me how a community-owned co-op might help resolve that?

Deputy Grand Chief Jason Smallboy: I think I can expand a bit more on that example I was giving earlier. If the community had a co-op, say, and if they modelled it in a way such that the profits went back to savings, it would be the customers who were saving money rather than the store receiving profits. I think that kind of system would work. Really, if the prices were to come down, that would create competition in the community, and that would cause other companies in the community to also lower their prices in order to be competitive. Otherwise, they're going to go out of business.

I think competition in the communities is good. Like I said, we just need to figure out ways—it always comes back to funding—we can get the communities more involved and have some kind of funding available to look at the ways we could start up these co-ops in our community.

• (1205)

Mr. Jaime Battiste: Has there been any outreach to some of the bigger chains that might be able to help facilitate that, the Loblaws of the world, the co-ops? I'm just trying to figure out whether any work has been done by NAN to further that, work that our government could take a look at.

Deputy Grand Chief Jason Smallboy: That's something we would like to do. As I said, we're in the first phase right now and trying to get some resources so we can actually put people to work

doing outreach to these different companies that may want to do business in the NAN territory.

When I've gone to meetings in southern Ontario, I had some of my chiefs tell me, yes, we are looking for other partners when it comes to food. What I'll do, if somebody comes up to me and they're looking for a partner, is I'll just pass that information on to the community. I find a lot of the time what we need to do is to let these companies know what it's like actually doing business in the north because we—

The Chair: Chief, we'll have to leave it at that. We're past our time.

I want to say that, before the pandemic, at this meeting typically we would all rise from our seats and you would be sitting at the end of the table, and we'd be coming up personally to congratulate you and thank you. I think I can do that on behalf of our committee.

This is a very useful, valuable opportunity that we've had. As Ms. McLeod said, because you were the only person available today we were able to get more detail, but I have a feeling there is much more detail to come yet so I don't think our conversations are over. Once again, thank you so much.

We will now suspend for just a few minutes. I'll remind members and staff that they must leave the Zoom meeting and join the in camera webinar before we continue. That will require another set of numbers to punch in, so thank you for that.

This meeting is temporarily suspended.

[Proceedings continue in camera]

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