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Chair: Mrs. Karen Vecchio



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• (1535)

[English]

The Chair (Mrs. Karen Vecchio (Elgin—Middlesex—London, CPC)): I'm calling this meeting to order.

Good afternoon, everyone, and welcome to meeting number 101 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on the Status of Women. Today's meeting is taking place in a hybrid format pursuant to the Standing Orders. Members are attending in person in the room and remotely using the Zoom application.

Today we have witnesses both online and in the room. For those online, I'm going to remind you to put up your hand. Make sure your interpretation is set according to your choice. Also, if you are not speaking, please have your mike on mute. For the people in the room, ensure you choose French, English or floor. Those are your options. The last thing is to keep your earpiece away from the microphone. I also remind you that all questions should come through the chair.

We will be keeping a speaking list if there are any questions, and we'll contend with that.

Let's get back to business.

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2) and the motion adopted by the committee on Monday, November 27, 2023, the committee will resume its study on the implementation of a red dress alert.

Today we have two witnesses here in person and another online. From the National Family and Survivors Circle, we have Hilda Anderson-Pyrz, chair, and Keely.

I don't know your last name.

Unknown 1 FEWO 101- (As an Individual): Good afternoon, Madam Chair. My name is Keely Ten Fingers and I'm a technician with National Family and Survivors Circle Incorporated. I'm here as a support to Hilda.

Thank you for having us here today.

The Chair: Thank you so much for coming and filling that role.

Online, you will find Sandra DeLaronde from Giganaweni-maanaanig, which is an Ojibwa word.

I will be passing the floor over to our witnesses, with five minutes for each group. We'll be going online first to Sandra.

Sandra, you have the floor for five minutes.

Mrs. Sandra DeLaronde (Executive Director, Giganaweni-maanaanig): Madam Chair, when you say “Giganaweni-maanaanig”, just imagine yourself canoeing down the Red River, which is where I am today. The waters aren't open yet, but they're getting there.

Thank you for this opportunity to present today on the red dress alert at the standing committee.

The safety, protection and well-being of indigenous women, girls and gender-diverse relatives are essential to creating a better country. The final report of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, “Reclaiming Power and Place”, outlined a central finding of genocide, and had 231 calls for justice that would create transformative change for indigenous women, girls and gender-diverse relatives.

It is critical that the red dress alert, or whatever you choose to name it, be implemented immediately. I, along with many of my colleagues who are at the table, held consultations over the winter to hear from community, distinctions-based representatives, political organizations and community-based organizations about what an alert system means, what it could look like and how it should or could be implemented.

What is clear is that an alert system must be co-developed and co-led by indigenous relatives. Beyond an alert, support to the community and to families of the missing must be in place. For people who are actually going to look for the missing, people who are going to support families during the process and people who will support those who have been located, there is a requirement for wraparound support. Each one of those functions also requires training to ensure that communities and families have the capacity to support one another.

The alert system, when it is implemented, should take into account regional disparities and very clearly have an accessible approach, under which technology, language and community are considered.

Indigenous people living in urban areas have been largely ignored, erased or undermined and have been silenced under the current distinctions-based approach. There must be respect for full inclusion of the urban indigenous population.

We in Giganawenimaanaanig have been working on a data project, which we call a story map. It clearly outlines that many of those who have gone missing or been murdered in our territory have come from communities but have relocated to urban environments for medical or education reasons or to escape poverty and violence. Many of these relatives have become vulnerable and have been targeted by perpetrators of violence. I could share many anecdotes that would illustrate the ongoing systemic violence. However, there isn't time.

It should be considered that many of our relatives are indeed internally displaced persons under the meaning of the UN refugee convention of 1951. In fact, we must provide support in a manner that acknowledges the human rights and international conventions of our relatives.

Meegwetch.

The Chair: Thank you.

I just want to add that, because her camera was off, I did not get a chance to introduce Charlene Lavallee, who is the president of the Association of Métis, Non and Status Indians Saskatchewan.

Charlene, I'll come back to you in five minutes, but thank you very much for joining us.

I'm now going to pass the floor over to Hilda. You have the floor for five minutes.

• (1540)

Mrs. Hilda Anderson-Pyrz (Chair, National Family and Survivors Circle): Thank you.

Good afternoon, members of the Standing Committee on the Status of Women.

I am Hilda Anderson-Pyrz, chair of the National Family and Survivors Circle, a non-profit organization incorporated in April 2023, led by indigenous women and gender-diverse individuals who are impacted family members of missing and murdered indigenous women, girls and two-spirit and gender-diverse people, as well as survivors of gender- and race-based violence.

I respectfully recognize that our meeting today is taking place on the traditional unceded and unsundered territory of the Algonquin Anishinabe people.

Today, I stand with the MMIWG2S+ families, survivors and two-spirit and gender-diverse people whose resilience and advocacy have been critical in pushing forward the red dress alert initiative. I give my thanks to the federal government and MP Leah Gazan for their efforts toward the establishment and forthcoming implementation of the red dress alert. It is a reflection of decades of advocacy for transformative change and action.

The red dress alert is an essential tool for the protection of indigenous women, girls and two-spirit and gender-diverse people, representing a significant advancement in our response to the crisis. Our communities are confronted with the daily disappearances of indigenous women, girls and 2SLGBTQIA+ people. It is not a reflection of choice but of a societal disregard for indigenous lives, making us targets for violence.

The urgency of these situations cannot be overstated. When an indigenous woman, girl or gender-diverse individual goes missing, immediate action is crucial in mobilizing information, resources and collaborative efforts to facilitate locating them safely.

The development and implementation of the red dress alert should be led by indigenous women and gender-diverse people and frontline indigenous organizations. Effective responses require listening to those directly affected, especially in remote areas like Nunavut, where limited connectivity poses additional challenges. Engagements in these communities are essential in gathering insights and guiding our actions.

The red dress alert, alongside comprehensive wraparound support services, aims to prevent and respond to these disappearances. These services must be rooted in indigenous ways of knowing, being and doing, and must be independent from political influence. It is critical that they uphold the fundamental human rights of indigenous women, girls and two-spirit and gender-diverse people in order for us to live with dignity and safety.

I call on all levels of government to support the red dress alert and its associated services, highlighting the need for prompt and impactful action, and investments in a dedicated alert system for the indigenous community.

In conclusion, I thank you for this opportunity. The implementation of the red dress alert is critical, not just as a policy measure but as a commitment to resolving the MMIWG2S+ national crisis without political obstruction. Our actions now can provide the opportunity for a secure, safer and more dignified future for indigenous women, girls and two-spirit and gender-diverse people.

Ekosi. Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you so much.

We're now going online.

Charlene, you have five minutes. When you see me start to move my arms, your time is over.

Ms. Charlene Lavallee (President, Association of Métis, Non and Status Indians Saskatchewan): Hello. My name is Charlene Lavallee. I'm the president of the Association of Métis, Non and Status Indians Saskatchewan.

We have community charters across the province in several different areas on the northwest side of Saskatchewan, which is very remote, and in northeast Saskatchewan, which is even more remote. Then, if we move into our urban centres, we cover all the urban centres in Saskatchewan.

Saskatchewan includes in its treaty territory treaties 8, 10, 6, 7, 4, 2 and 5. Saskatchewan is also the home of the Métis.

AMNSIS is not part of the distinctions-based groups. We are an organization under the Congress of Aboriginal Peoples. We have been involved with the MMIWG national round table since 2016. Up until February of this year, we were involved. Then there was a meeting this February that we were not invited to attend personally.

With regard to the red dress alert, I'd like to thank MP Leah Gazan for putting this forward. I listened in on the communication on Tuesday. It was more about the processes of an alert system, and it was really interesting to hear how quickly it could be onboarded and started.

One of the hardest things that has happened for MMIWG has been Bill C-18. Many of our people get their news from social media. News not being allowed any longer on social media has led to a large void in sharing information about people who have recently gone missing.

There are a couple of things I'd like to touch on. This red dress alert and everything attached to MMIWG need to be indigenous-led and need to include all indigenous people in Canada. The current distinctions-based policy identifying organizations is unconstitutional. The Constitution of Canada mentions, in section 35, our first nations, Inuit and Métis. The Daniels decision also included non-status peoples in section 35. Section 35 does not mention the AFN, the ITK and the MNC.

Right now, the distinctions-based approach is the approach this government is using. It's leaving out all the non-status peoples, and it takes away my freedom of choice, which I am supposed to have under the Charter of Rights and under UNDRIP. It is choosing to only work with certain groups. Again, indigenous people, primarily women, are being left out of processes that could save their lives.

All aspects of the MMIWG calls for justice need to be inclusive of all indigenous groups. They should not be political, and the processes need to be nationally streamlined by indigenous organizations.

• (1545)

Policing has not always worked in favour of vulnerable indigenous people, and neither have government agencies, like social workers. When considering all of these factors, we have always said that policing has been a big part of the problem. I think those things need to be heard.

Are you waving your hand at me?

The Chair: Yes, Charlene, I am.

Ms. Charlene Lavallee: It was a shot of the whole room, so I was just making sure.

That would be what I have to say at this point.

The Chair: Thank you so much for your testimony so far.

We'll be going around the room. Each party will have six minutes to ask their first round of questions, and then we'll go into our second round.

I'm going to give the floor over to Michelle Ferreri for her first six minutes.

Ms. Michelle Ferreri (Peterborough—Kawartha, CPC): Thanks, Chair.

Thank you to all the witnesses for being here. It's certainly an important study that also has an impact on my riding of Peterborough—Kawartha and across this country.

I would like to hear from all of you. The point of this study is to get a handle on how we best roll this out and how to be most efficient. We had a phenomenal witness here this week who was a rock star, and she's doing it in Nova Scotia.

I'm sorry; her first name has left me.

• (1550)

Mrs. Anna Roberts (King—Vaughan, CPC): It's Jennifer.

Ms. Michelle Ferreri: Yes, it's Jennifer. She was incredible. She had some really great points.

We hear the same thing from a lot of the witnesses: “indigenous-led” and “for indigenous, by indigenous”, which I think are critical. She didn't support the idea of this being government-run.

I'll start with Hilda, if I can, and then ask the other witnesses to answer too.

How do you see this? Do you see it independent of each location? We have many indigenous women and girls living off reserve and living in urban centres. How do you see it rolled out and implemented? Is it a national program?

Mrs. Hilda Anderson-Pyrz: First of all, I want to amplify that this is a national crisis, so I see it rolling out at a national level, to be fully supported. Everybody should be part of it and develop it collectively.

One of the biggest challenges we see in working on the issue of missing and murdered indigenous women and girls is the issue of borders and jurisdiction. That often hinders responses, so I think it has to be national in scope and there has to be a national response. It also has to be equitably resourced to ensure that it is successfully implemented and that regardless of where you live and which community you're from, you're able to access the system.

Ms. Michelle Ferreri: Before I get the other witnesses to answer, to that point, it was Jennifer who said that she was the kind of person who just did it. She talked about bureaucracy. Sometimes you have these great ideas and nothing happens because after everybody sits around the table and says they sound great, everybody walks away and there's no action tied to them because there's not one leader. How do we prevent bureaucracy in something like this?

I'm happy to hear the other witnesses is they want to chime in. That is the biggest hurdle I see in a lot of these things, because I can't think of anybody who would dispute having this alert in place to save lives.

Mrs. Hilda Anderson-Pyrz: I think, ultimately, there has to be an accountability mechanism in place to ensure there's transformative action and a commitment to ensure the red dress alert is implemented. Ultimately, inaction results in the continuance of the disappearances and murders of indigenous women, girls and two-spirit and gender-diverse people.

I really think that ethically we have to look at the urgency for commitment and action, because our lives depend upon it.

Ms. Michelle Ferreri: Do any of the other witnesses want to comment?

Charlene, do you want to chime in?

Ms. Charlene Lavallee: I think this is very urgent. The calls for justice were completed. It would be interesting to know how many more women have gone missing or were murdered since the completion of the action plan. It's a daily thing, and for the families who have lost family members, it's too late.

It's very important, and I agree that it needs to be at the national level with provincial entities working together instead of everybody working in separate little silos. This way the information is shared across all jurisdictions.

Ms. Michelle Ferreri: To Sandra, what I'm really asking, to get to the nuts and bolts, is how we make it national but give autonomy and not have government interfere with it.

Mrs. Sandra DeLaronde: I think there is a place for government in all of this. We know historically, and even in contemporary times, that for things to move in the community, it has been indigenous women with no support who have created change and maintained change in our communities.

We have been carrying these issues for at least the last 50 years on our own, and now we need government, the bureaucracy, to support this change, because we can't do it on our own, obviously. When rules, policies and laws don't change, and the number of those who go missing and murdered continues to increase, we're not able to do this on our own. We need support from governments, bureaucracies, to invest in change and invest in safety.

We can start the alert now—and we must start it now—because women go missing. Summer for many people is a time of rest and respite, but those of us on the ground know that the number of relatives who go missing or are murdered increases with the temperature.

We can do that. People who want to talk some more can talk some more and work out whatever details or jurisdictional wrangling they may have, but we have to get it done now.

● (1555)

The Chair: Thank you so much.

We're now moving to Emmanuella Lambropoulos, who has the floor for six minutes.

Go ahead.

Ms. Emmanuella Lambropoulos (Saint-Laurent, Lib.): Thank you.

I want to start by thanking all of our witnesses for their great testimony and for being here to answer some questions on this very important study brought forward by Leah Gazan, who is a big advocate of this and talks about it very often, and makes sure that we're talking about it here.

My first question is going to Charlene, because you were the last one to testify and this one is top of mind for me.

You mentioned that policing is part of the problem, that law enforcement hasn't always sided with vulnerable indigenous women, and I agree, of course. I'm wondering what changes you think can be made to improve that situation and to improve collaboration with the police to make the red dress alert something the police are helpful with.

Ms. Charlene Lavallee: Well, ultimately, our police services are overworked as it is, and lots of times when you're dealing with any issue of somebody missing, it takes a lot more time, effort and report processing than the police are able to put in.

It could always start with an organization outside the police. It could start with an organization taking the information and working with the family, and then the agency notifying the police and going from there.

This isn't a criminal offence. At that point, it's not a criminal incident, so it doesn't necessarily have to have police involvement right from the get-go. We all recall two years ago that during a check on the wellness of somebody, a young indigenous woman was killed. Sometimes it's simple things like that. We have a stigma when it comes to policing and police officers, and sometimes it just de-escalates the whole situation when somebody from their own community is checking on them rather than a police officer.

Ms. Emmanuella Lambropoulos: The trust is what's obviously missing, and it would be better if they were only involved when they need to be.

Ms. Charlene Lavallee: That's correct.

Ms. Emmanuella Lambropoulos: Hilda, I'll go to you.

You talked about the fact that it's necessary and critical for us to implement this as quickly as possible. Other witnesses have been more in favour of it being run by organizations, and I think you spoke to that point as well.

Of course, federal and provincial governments should also be helping to fund and should be playing a role. I'm wondering what role you think the provinces and territories should play, versus the role that the federal government should play.

Mrs. Hilda Anderson-Pyrz: I think one of the things I really amplify in doing this work is that, regardless if you're the federal government or a provincial or territorial government, everybody has a responsibility to be actors in the safety and security of indigenous women, girls and two-spirit and gender-diverse people, because many individuals who reside in their provinces and territories go missing at alarming rates.

I think it's really critical that everybody take a collective, collaborative approach in the implementation of the red dress alert for it to be successful. As I mentioned previously, jurisdictional boundaries often have hindered the safe location of an indigenous woman or girl or of two-spirit and gender-diverse persons. I think it's equal participation among all governments.

• (1600)

Ms. Emmanuella Lambropoulos: Thank you.

Sandra, you spoke about the importance of implementing it. I'm wondering if you could talk a bit about what we can do to ensure it's safe and it warrants the trust of indigenous partners.

Mrs. Sandra DeLaronde: I think the way the alert system currently works in the provinces is that it's generally managed through their emergency management services. Decisions on whether or not alerts go out are made by the police force.

I think having family members or representatives of the community at the table when making those decisions is critical to ensuring trust, and then, if it is determined that an alert doesn't go out, there should be a measure in place so that there is an opportunity to review, alongside the community, whether or not that was the right measure to take.

Ms. Emmanuella Lambropoulos: Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you so much.

We're now going over to Andréanne Larouche.

Andréanne, you have six minutes.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Andréanne Larouche (Shefford, BQ): Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

I'd like to thank all the witnesses for being here today.

I feel that we have a duty to remember the women and girls who have gone missing, who have been murdered. We must do this work rigorously, seriously, to honour their memory, so that they didn't die in vain. That's what I want to hear from the witnesses today.

I'll start with you, Mrs. Anderson-Pyrz.

In your opening remarks, you talked about the need to mobilize resources. We know that a red dress alert won't happen on its own. Obviously, it has to be put in place. How do you see the resources aspect? What resources should be mobilized to ensure that the red dress alert will really be effective?

[*English*]

Mrs. Hilda Anderson-Pyrz: Among some of the critical resources we need is infrastructure. That's to ensure that everybody has access to this red dress alert system, especially when we're looking at individuals who live in remote and isolated areas.

In addition to that, there have to be wraparound supports to support individuals in vulnerable positions who have gone missing, and a long-term sustainable commitment to fully resource the red dress alert system and sustain it. It can't just be a one-off that happens for one year and does not continue. We need to ensure that it's around for many years and for many generations, because our lives matter.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Andréanne Larouche: Thank you very much. I'll ask you more questions later.

I'm going to ask a question along the same lines as the one I just asked.

Mrs. DeLaronde, in your opening remarks, you talked about the importance of supporting families, of having something integrated. So you're on the same wavelength as what we've just said.

How do you see this integration, this support for families? I'm asking this question because we realize that the red dress alert isn't a magic wand and that it will also require a whole continuum of services upstream and downstream, from prevention to the services offered afterwards.

Can you enlighten us and give us some ideas so that we can do something? We're talking about red dress alerts in this study, but I think our recommendations will have to go beyond the simple application of the alert and that we also think about a continuum of services.

[*English*]

Mrs. Sandra DeLaronde: Yes, absolutely, the work has to go beyond that annoying noise we get on our phone. Once that alert is actioned, we have to have people on the ground to assist and support families in locating their loved ones. Whether we're looking at the rangers' model in the NWT and the Yukon or the volunteer firefighters' model in the provinces, we have people who have some experience and dedication to the well-being of society we can call upon to support this initiative.

Also, families need to have wellness supports when someone goes missing. Critically, we find that those who have gone missing and have been returned to families are traumatized. There needs to be support to help them regain their confidence and sense of well-being when they're returned to their families. It's not just issuing an alert on the system. It's important to provide that full spectrum of services.

• (1605)

[*Translation*]

Ms. Andr anne Larouche: I think that's a very wise thing for us to consider as we go through the report.

Ms. Lavallee, in your opening remarks, you talked about the inclusion of all groups, but also about the importance of not making it political.

You also mentioned this issue, Mrs. Anderson-Pyrz.

Ms. Lavallee, what leads you to believe, at this stage, that this issue could become political?

[*English*]

Ms. Charlene Lavallee: It already has become political. As I stated, the Congress of Aboriginal Peoples has been involved with the MMIWG round table since 2016. February was the first time there was an in-person...in regard to the finalization since the completion of the calls for justice. Our organization was not invited to attend personally. We asked if we could attend personally, and they did not invite us and would not change their mind—

The Chair: Charlene, there are just a few seconds to end this, because we have to get into our next round. Be very quick.

Ms. Charlene Lavallee: Okay. We were told it was distinctions-based only, which is MNC, AFN and ITK.

The Chair: Thank you so much.

We're now turning it over to Leah Gazan for six minutes.

Ms. Leah Gazan (Winnipeg Centre, NDP): I just want to start by thanking this committee, which has prioritized bringing our women, girls and gender-diverse relatives home. I want to thank you all for always making space for this discussion.

I also thank the women who are joining us in the room. They're real champions on literally the front lines night and day working on this issue, not just in an academic sense, but also working directly with families every single day. I want to thank you all for your efforts.

My first question is for Hilda.

You mentioned Nunavut. I know that through consultations there were technology issues. Why do you think it's important to engage stakeholders in Nunavut directly? What are some of the reasons for that?

Mrs. Hilda Anderson-Pyrz: I think it's critical to engage them due to their remoteness, isolation and connectivity challenges. We need to ensure that all indigenous people have services and infrastructure to meet their social and economic needs. We need to ensure that all governments uphold the social and economic rights of in-

igenous women, girls and 2SLGBTQQAI+ people, with a focus on call for justice 4.1.

Additionally, their experiences can educate us so that we ensure their experiences and the types of services and responses they need are included. We often see a lack of resources, supports and engagement. Many people who are factored into the cost to engage are relatives who live in northern, remote areas. Cost should not be a factor. They should have equitable participation in all the different types of initiatives that are going to impact their lives.

• (1610)

Ms. Leah Gazan: Thank you so much.

My next question is for Sandra.

I know that Hilda and Charlene spoke about political interference. I'm wondering if you agree with that. If you do agree, what does that look like? How can things be done in a way that there is not political interference? What is political interference?

Answer quickly, in 20 seconds. I'm just kidding.

Voices: Oh, oh!

Mrs. Sandra DeLaronde: No, you're not kidding.

I think that, yes, there is political interference. There is a want to appease individuals or individual organizations.

Let me be clear that they are representative political organizations. They are not governments, regardless of the wording that has been used. Many of us on the ground and on the front lines have no less of a commitment or responsibility to ensure change in our communities than they do.

I think greater weight needs to be given to those who actually do the work on the ground. We've seen that through the consultations. Those who had clear and distinct answers were those who did the work on the ground.

I understand that people want more time to talk and engage. Certainly that can happen along with the implementation process. We know that when we talk and we find ways forward, we can do things better together, but we can't wait because we've waited too long.

Ms. Leah Gazan: Thank you so much.

My next question is for Charlene. It's just building on that.

We've heard that a lot of these battles have been led by women from our communities on the front lines of this issue—often unpaid. Why is it critical to centre the voices of women, gender-diverse folks and families who have been impacted by this ongoing genocide?

Ms. Charlene Lavallee: I'm sorry, but I didn't even get the question.

Was that a question as to why—

Ms. Leah Gazan: Why is it critical to centre women, gender-diverse people and impacted families in decision-making and discussions on the red dress, outside of political organizations?

Ms. Charlene Lavallee: I think because a lot of us are the mothers. We're the aunts and the grandmothers. We've been the centre of our families.

I think when it comes to the emotional stuff that goes with somebody going missing, it's usually the women who are on the ground doing the work.

That would be my answer to that.

Ms. Leah Gazan: I have only 12 seconds, so I just want to thank the committee again. This means so very much.

Also, to the witnesses I hold in such high regard, thank you. It feels so good to my spirit to have other strong indigenous women with me in committee today. It's a real treat.

The Chair: Thanks, Leah.

We're now going on to our second round. It's five minutes, five minutes, two and a half minutes and two and a half minutes.

I'll pass the floor over to Anna.

• (1615)

Mrs. Anna Roberts: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you to all you brave ladies. I know how important this study is. Thank you to Leah for bringing it forward.

I'm going to share something with you. I can relate to this somehow because I was part of the foster system. I've seen a lot of stuff I'd rather not speak about.

I read this book recently called *If I Go Missing*. It was written by Brianna Jonnie, who at the time in 2016 was a 14-year-old young lady. She wrote a letter to the Winnipeg Police Service imploring them to do better when investigating cases of missing indigenous people.

I'm not going to read all of the book, but there was a quote in there that really affected me because of what I had experienced in my past. Two years later, when she was older, Brianna questioned Prime Minister Justin Trudeau at a town hall at the University of Winnipeg about the missing and murdered indigenous women and girls inquiry. She asked, "When so many no longer trust the process, how will you measure—in quantifiable terms—whether the inquiry into murdered and missing Indigenous women and girls is successful?"

It is 2024, so if I do the math, I think that's about eight years. Coming from the private sector, I am so sick and tired of things taking so bloody long. I'd like to hear your comments on that, Hilda, because this is important. What do you say to that?

Mrs. Hilda Anderson-Pyrz: I'm looking at this through the lens of an indigenous woman. Often it feels like our lives are not valued and that we don't matter. It sends a message to society that it's okay to kill us, it's okay to kidnap us and it's okay to exploit us when

governments do not take the necessary transformative action where there is an impact on the ground.

I want to feel safe and secure as an indigenous woman in this country and that my granddaughters and generations to come will know that our lives are valued. If we go missing, I want to know that people are going to look for us and take transformative action, that we're going to be safely located and that, more importantly, we're not going to continue to go missing at alarming rates. I want to know that our lives matter, we're valued, we have equity and equality in this country and our rights are upheld.

Mrs. Anna Roberts: I want to tell you that if anybody hasn't read this book, it is a great read. I was in tears reading it; I'm not going to lie. I'm almost in tears talking about it.

My next question is for Charlene.

You stated that when victims are found, they are traumatized. Are there any penalties for the perpetrators, and if so, what are those penalties? What can we learn in order to stop this type of victimization?

Ms. Charlene Lavallee: There have been penalties, but if you go back to previous cases, I would say the penalties have not been meaningful at all. If anything, they've actually said that our lives are worth less because the penalties that have been—

Mrs. Anna Roberts: I'm sorry to interrupt. The penalties don't meet the crime, then.

Ms. Charlene Lavallee: No, not at all.

Mrs. Anna Roberts: Would you agree with me that we should give these perpetrators 25 years to life in jail?

Ms. Charlene Lavallee: Each individual case is different. However, definitely it should be more than 18 months or two years for hitting somebody in the back of the head with a hitch and changing their life.

Mrs. Anna Roberts: The reason I say that is I met a nine-year-old recently who went through this traumatization. It's a life-changing event. It's so difficult to get over. Also, when they know the perpetrators are out on the road again, it retraumatizes them.

If we are going to do something to avoid this, we need to make the penalty fit the crime, because victims deserve to walk the streets without fear. Would you agree?

Ms. Charlene Lavallee: I agree a hundred per cent, but I would go even further and state that our mental health in Saskatchewan and across Canada is in crisis. There are people out there who are suffering with those same experiences right now, and in Saskatchewan, it takes two years to see a psychiatrist.

• (1620)

The Chair: Charlene, I have to cut you off again. I'm so sorry about that.

I'm now going to move over to Anita Vandenbeld for the next five minutes.

You have the floor.

Ms. Anita Vandenbeld (Ottawa West—Nepean, Lib.): Thank you very much.

I want to thank all of our witnesses, not just for being here today but for all the work you're doing.

My first question, as some of you have mentioned, is about the north, Nunavut and issues and challenges around access to communication systems. Others have talked about the urban indigenous aspect and completely different challenges.

How do we create a single system for the entire country when the challenges and needs are so incredibly different in different parts of the country?

If I could, I'll start with Mrs. Anderson-Pyrz.

Mrs. Hilda Anderson-Pyrz: When we're looking at it, we look at the need to provide funding for adequate resources so that each area can develop the tools and infrastructure it needs to be a participant and to access these systems. Especially when we're looking at the north, we know there's inequity and inequality in accessing any type of service or support. There needs to be a lot of work done there.

We also see that indigenous women, girls and two-spirit and gender-diverse people are leaving remote, isolated areas to access education, health or a new way of life. We have to look at it as a circular model and build infrastructure so everybody feels that they're part of it and that the system is accessible.

Ms. Anita Vandenbeld: If I may, I'll just follow up before I go to the others.

When you talk about that infrastructure, maybe you could be specific. What exactly does that mean in terms of staff, funding and how it would work?

Mrs. Hilda Anderson-Pyrz: We need to look at what infrastructure is required.

I'm not a technician by any means, but there's the technical aspect of having the tools and the technology to participate in this red dress alert. There are also the supports and resources to take care of the mental and emotional well-being of individuals who have been impacted by violence and who have gone missing.

We also need to look at it through a prevention lens. We need to ensure that supports and resources are there to prevent indigenous women, girls and two-spirit and gender-diverse people from going missing.

Ms. Anita Vandenbeld: Ms. DeLaronde, you mentioned the urban indigenous aspect. I wonder if you could elaborate a little about the different challenges, the different structures and the different needs there may be for urban indigenous people.

Mrs. Sandra DeLaronde: This morning I got up and thought, "Jeez, what would it be like to get up and not have to worry about one of our loved ones going missing or one of our loved ones being murdered?" That's the reality of indigenous moms and grandmothers in this country. No one else has to experience that.

Winnipeg is known as ground zero. If I could wake up in the morning and know that this is a safe country and a safe city for my daughter and granddaughter, I would be the happiest woman alive.

We know there are disparities between representative political organizations, that there is limited funding and that the ones doing the work on the ground are families and survivors, so they need to have adequate resources.

We also have to support them going beyond the trauma. We can be stationary in this place and it doesn't serve the individual or the community in any way. When someone is murdered in our community, the perpetrator is not asking them if they're first nations or Métis or Inuit. They just know it is a vulnerable indigenous woman whose life they're taking.

I think we need to consider this, understand that the urban environment is different, take into account the communities that are already doing the work and support those communities in developing greater support and accessibility for our families.

• (1625)

Ms. Charlene Lavallee: I would just add that there is room for the distinctions-based approach in the area of prevention.

Ms. Anita Vandenbeld: I want to thank you, because it's easy to forget how real this is—the grief and trauma that you are all living—when we're putting a system together. I want to thank you for reminding us of that.

The Chair: Thanks very much.

We're now moving over to Andréanne Larouche for two minutes and 30 seconds.

Andréanne, you have the floor.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Andréanne Larouche: Thank you, Madam Chair.

I'd like to thank the witnesses once again for being with us today. Their testimony has been extremely informative.

Mrs. DeLaronde, I'd like to come back to your opening remarks. You mentioned the 1951 UN Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and other international conventions. Could you tell us more about that? We know that the way Canada is trying to achieve reconciliation and establish a nation-to-nation relationship is sully-ing Canada's image on the international stage.

So I'd like you to tell us more about why compliance with the UN Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and this red dress alert are important in the context of international conventions.

Have you heard of similar experiences in other countries that could be useful to us?

[*English*]

Mrs. Sandra DeLaronde: What I do know is that there is a movement in the global south that is looking to Canada. However, in other ways, they are more advanced than Canada in providing protection on the basis of rights to indigenous women and girls.

I don't think we have had an inclusionary process in this country that recognizes indigenous women as rights holders. That was affirmed in the final report of the national inquiry, and we need to continue to support this. What do those rights look like for indigenous women and their families? It is certainly not necessarily what's presented, because there hasn't been an opportunity to speak with us because our voices have been silenced.

Creating opportunities to hear from indigenous women, girls and gender-diverse relatives is really important in the red dress movement, but more importantly in how we live in civil society.

One of the things we have often forgotten or misplaced is that as result of the genocidal policies of government, indigenous women are misplaced, are internally displaced persons under the meaning of the UN convention on refugees. What does that look like? How do we deal with that in the long term?

The Chair: I have to cut you off for the next round, but thank you very much.

I will now pass it over to Leah for the final round.

Ms. Leah Gazan: Thank you so much.

I know that all the witnesses spoke about the importance of wraparound supports. My question is for Hilda.

What do wraparound supports look like for you? Why are they important?

Mrs. Hilda Anderson-Pyrz: Thank you so much, Leah.

I just really wanted to quickly amplify that when we look at this, it's really about justice and human security as well. We really need to put a lens on the principles for change from the national inquiry when we look at a focus on substantive equality and on human and indigenous rights. It has to be a decolonizing approach. Wraparound services, they have to be strength-based and rooted in our indigenous ways of being, knowing and doing. They have to be holistic, and that will help strengthen us as indigenous women, girls and two-spirit and gender-diverse people with protective factors to allow us to live our lives with dignity and safety.

In addition to this, wraparound services also uphold our indigenous and human rights because as indigenous women, girls and two-spirit and gender-diverse people, when we're born we're born with a bundle of rights and, right from birth as indigenous women, our rights are not upheld. That's really critical, especially when we look at call for justice 3.4, which is for all governments to ensure indigenous communities receive immediate and necessary resources, including funding and support for the establishment of sustainable, permanent, no-barrier, preventative, accessible and holistic wraparound services.

In addition to this, I also wanted to quickly highlight call for justice 3.1. It calls upon all governments to ensure the rights to health and wellness of indigenous people and specifically that indigenous women and girls are recognized and protected on an equitable basis.

We also look at the importance of creating pathways for human security. If we do that, we will be really focusing on what wraparound supports look like from our lens and ensuring that we

see ourselves in those wraparound supports, that we feel connected, that we feel like we belong and that these supports are meeting our needs from a cultural lens. Often the supports and services that are out there are not meeting our needs, and often they're really deeply embedded with systemic and structural racism. When we're vulnerable, we're seeking safety, but we continue to experience violence because of the systemic and structural racism.

• (1630)

The Chair: Wow, what an incredible panel.

I would like to begin by just thanking Hilda and Keely, and online, Sandra and Charlene. Thank you so much for your testimony today. We do greatly appreciate it.

We're going to suspend so we can switch over the panels, and then we'll get started immediately. Thank you to the ladies, and we'll be back in a second.

• (1630)

(Pause)

• (1635)

The Chair: We're reconvening and I'd like to welcome everybody. If everybody could take their seats, that would be wonderful.

I'm just going to remind the ladies who are on today's panel about the earpieces. When you're not speaking, please make sure you have your microphone off. That would be very useful. Thank you very much.

Also, I'm sure you know about interpretation, but what we're going to do is that I would now like to welcome two witnesses for this next panel. Before we get started I am going to give notice, because everybody knows that today we have votes. Bells will be going at 5:15 p.m. We will take a vote at that time, but I believe we all will go to vote at 5:25 p.m., and I'll ask for that unanimous consent at that time.

We only have two panellists at this time and although we're starting late, it will all work out in the end.

To begin, I would like to welcome the Native Council of Prince Edward Island and Lisa Cooper, who is the president and chief. From the Congress of Aboriginal Peoples, we have Jessica Savoy, who is the national youth representative.

I'll pass it over to Lisa Cooper for her five minutes of testimony.

When you see my arm going up, please wind up your remarks.

Ms. Lisa Cooper (President and Chief, Native Council of Prince Edward Island): Thank you.

I want to give a land acknowledgement. I am from Prince Edward Island, which is the traditional, ancestral homeland of my ancestors, the Mi'kmaq peoples.

Hello, members of the Standing Committee on the Status of Women. My name is Lisa Cooper, and I am the president and chief of the Native Council of Prince Edward Island.

My organization has existed since 1975 and has been advocating for the rights of off-reserve indigenous peoples for nearly 50 years.

Just recently, there was an instance of a missing and murdered indigenous woman in P.E.I. Summer Kneebone was reported missing on August 7, 2023. My organization rallied around the family immediately, and we spent the next month working closely with the municipal police, RCMP and volunteers to locate Summer Kneebone's remains, which were found on September 15.

In this instance, my organization encountered many issues in our search efforts. The municipal police force and RCMP officers did not know what the acronym of MMIWG stood for. They did not communicate with each other to coordinate our volunteer search efforts, and P.E.I. had not yet implemented a missing persons act that authorized the police or RCMP to request access to Summer's social media records. As P.E.I. is Canada's smallest province, cases of MMIWG are not as common for us, but situations have untold impacts on smaller communities.

My organization works closely with our sister organization, the New Brunswick Aboriginal Peoples Council, in supporting their "Looking Out For Each Other" project. This project is a collaboration among maritime provinces to report cases of missing indigenous people and coordinate search efforts. Through this project we have found that many times an indigenous person goes missing in one maritime province only to be found in a different province. This project has shown, on a small scale, the success that can occur when search efforts are coordinated across different provinces, organizations and police services. The red dress alert that is being proposed by the government will be a natural extension of the work already being done in the maritime provinces and will be welcomed greatly by our communities.

Between 2017 and 2019, I served as a representative for the Congress of Aboriginal Peoples on the MMIWG working group table, providing input into the 2021 MMIWG national action plan. In the three years since the MMIWG national action plan was released, I have seen little commitment from the federal government to address MMIWG and 2SLGBTQIA+ in off-reserve communities.

The MMIWG national plan provided an inclusive definition for distinctions-based supports that included off-reserve, urban and two-spirit representation. Over 80% of the indigenous peoples in Canada live off reserve, yet our voices are often silent in consultations. As we move forward in the development of the red dress alert, I ask that the federal government uphold the inclusive approach to MMIWG promised in the national action plan and ensure that the voices of the off-reserve indigenous peoples, as represented

by the Congress of Aboriginal Peoples, are heard in the development of the red dress alert.

Thank you, honourable members, for your time. *Wela'lin.*

● (1640)

The Chair: Thank you so much.

We'll continue online with Jessica Savoy.

Jessica, you have the floor for five minutes.

Ms. Jessica Savoy (National Youth Representative, Congress of Aboriginal Peoples): Good evening, members of the Standing Committee on the Status of Women.

Thank you very much for the opportunity to bear witness to this important issue.

My name is Jessica Savoy. I'm a proud Nisga'a woman born and raised in the beautiful unceded Coast Salish territory of what we now know as Vancouver. I am calling from the unceded Coast Salish territory.

I would like to share briefly that I am the vice-president of the Northwest Indigenous Council and the national youth representative for the Congress of Aboriginal Peoples.

I am happy to be here with you to advocate on behalf of my community, as well as the CAP national youth council, to better the lives of all indigenous peoples in Canada and to help in doing that.

I also want to share that most of my life I have worked with communities to implement policy, to engage on important issues affecting them and to work with indigenous and non-indigenous youth within the inner-city neighbourhoods of Vancouver but also across the country through my representative role with the Congress of Aboriginal Peoples. I have experience working with local non-profits and municipal governments in various capacities.

I want to share my experience and perspectives on the red dress alert and some insights from the CAP youth on its implementation.

We know that, in May 2023, the House of Commons supported a motion that deemed the ongoing crisis of missing and murdered indigenous women and girls and two-spirit and gender-diverse peoples a national emergency and called for funding for an alert system to inform the public when an indigenous person is missing.

In December, through the MMIWG working group, CAP participated in the red dress alert engagement with the family and survivors circle. They chose to engage CAP and others because the federal government wasn't engaging enough groups. Much work remains, and it requires the perspectives and insights of all indigenous partners.

The red dress alert was also on the agenda of the indigenous-federal-provincial-territorial meeting held in February. Again, we were not fully included in this conversation. I do want to note, though, that I was invited at the very last minute to witness inside of that room, at the IFPT meeting. We were not fully included in this conversation, but I was able to witness parts of that engagement.

Given the history of colonialism and abuse, the often-reported anti-indigenous racism in the delivery of policing services, the killing of indigenous peoples by police officers during mental wellness checks and the dismissal by law enforcement of those reported cases of missing and murdered indigenous women and girls and two-spirit and gender-diverse peoples, setting up a red dress alert will be challenging. We know this. Governments have a responsibility to address these issues, especially in urban areas where policing is delivered by mainstream policing services.

Call for justice 5.8 calls on all governments “to enact missing persons legislation”. Preliminary national research on missing persons legislation in Canada identified huge gaps. Many provinces and territories do not have missing persons legislation that covers MMIWG, and Canada is currently lacking national standards for investigating cases of MMIWG2S+. Without these in order prior to the implementation of a red dress alert system, the process will fail to address systemic racism and build trust.

CAP PTOs have already begun this work. I would like to share with you an example from New Brunswick. In that province, working in collaboration with the right stakeholders, a national helpline was set up to provide support to indigenous families when loved ones go missing. Our affiliate organization, the New Brunswick Aboriginal Peoples Council, in partnership with the Gignoo Transition House, established 1-833-MMI-FIND, which is the helpline for families in need of direction. It's a 24-hour helpline that serves as a support. It provides information and a referral service to families to navigate the various systems when a loved person goes missing.

I want to share that the 1-833-MMI-FIND support line is a good example of what can be accomplished when indigenous communities lead the work. Equitable and respectful engagement is critical to the success of any program or policy the government is developing, and codevelopment is essential.

• (1645)

I will leave it at that, but one more note I wanted to make is that the current model, with the distinctions-based approach, is not necessarily working, because off-reserve indigenous peoples are often left out of consultation processes.

Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

I'm going to keep this session very tight. I will be cutting everybody off at the six-minute mark.

I'm going to pass the floor over to Dominique Vien first.

Dominique, you have the floor for six minutes.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Dominique Vien (Bellechasse—Les Etchemins—Lévis, CPC): Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

Good afternoon, ladies. Thank you for being with us this afternoon.

Obviously, this is an extremely important study that I think could also be very promising for indigenous women and girls who are facing challenges.

We're looking at how we can land, in a relevant and efficient way, a system called a “red dress alert” so that there will never again be any indigenous girls or women who fall into the wrong hands, in particular, or find themselves in impossible situations and lose their lives.

Ms. Cooper, how do you see this system? Do you see this as a national system? Who do you think should be involved in this organization, or who should be involved?

We felt and still feel that we want to have police forces as partners, but we don't necessarily want to have them as managers of this organization. I don't think a lot of people around the table are questioning the relevance of this system. I think there are questions about how to organize it.

What are your thoughts on that? Practically speaking, how do we set up this system? Who would do that? What would the cost be? Who's going to fund it? Would it be available across the country? What do we do with places where there's no cell reception, for example, and so on?

How do you see this system?

• (1650)

[*English*]

Ms. Lisa Cooper: Thank you. That's a very good question.

I think there are models out there that can be used. If you're looking at the Amber alert that's used for missing children.... I think there are models out there. The Amber alert is a Canada-wide one. I absolutely think there can be a model that is done like that.

In P.E.I., we're small. We don't often see murdered and missing here, because they go to New Brunswick or Nova Scotia. They end up in the bigger cities and in Toronto. I think there absolutely needs to be a Canada-wide one, and I think there are models out there that can be utilized, such as an Amber alert, for something similar for this.

The “Looking Out For Each Other” project that we partnered on with New Brunswick and Nova Scotia does a kind of three-province approach. There is that 1-800 number they can call and get support within three provinces. We work closely together to share information.

That's quick and dirty.

Voices: Oh, oh!

Ms. Lisa Cooper: I'm sorry. I said that it was a quick and dirty answer, because I know she's going to cut me off. She said this was going to be a really fast one, so I'm just trying to give you an example that could be utilized.

The Chair: I'm going to stop the time. I'm looking at Dominique.

It's just something like what I would say that's just fun and silly, Dominique. That's all. The English translation is hard.

It's all good. I'll continue the clock and we can resume.

[Translation]

Mrs. Dominique Vien: Ms. Cooper, I was very busy taking notes of what you were telling us. You said that we should follow the example of the Amber Alert. Is that correct?

I didn't understand why Ms. Cooper's intervention was stopped. So Ms. Cooper can continue her intervention, correct?

A voice: She had finished her intervention.

Mrs. Dominique Vien: Okay. I understand.

Ms. Cooper, in terms of funding, on the one hand, and police involvement, on the other, you said that there had been problems with interpretation and communication with the RCMP and local police, that it wasn't obvious and that there was perhaps a lack of knowledge of indigenous culture.

Beyond that, when it comes to the management of this new program, women told us that this system should be managed by indigenous communities, and ideally by women. Do you share that view?

[English]

Ms. Lisa Cooper: I think it is essential that it be community-led. It needs to be indigenous-led. As I indicated in my speech, the police and the RCMP weren't really aware of what “MMIWG” meant, so there had to be a lot of cross-cultural competency training with them. It's about rallying the community. We were able to rally the community through social media, so I think social media does a great job in education. Over 200 people showed up for the search.

I think there needs to be a lot of educational support around this. However, when you're looking at taking the lead, I think it needs to be indigenous-led.

[Translation]

Mrs. Dominique Vien: Ms. Cooper, should indigenous communities also choose the criteria used to determine when an alert should be triggered?

[English]

Ms. Lisa Cooper: Absolutely. I can't speak on behalf of all. We are tight-knit in our community. A lot of our women at risk are homeless. They suffer from mental health issues and addictions. It was almost 10 days before the family noticed there was no response from their child. That's what triggered us into the actual search and the connection with the family.

We have since put an action plan in place to stay connected to our vulnerable population in terms of homelessness, mental health, addictions, poverty and the ones involved in the child welfare system. There are so many areas that put them at risk, so we do a lot now with the community. How do we check on each other, and how do we make sure we are doing regular check-ins with the most vulnerable populations?

[Translation]

Mrs. Dominique Vien: Is that it?

[English]

The Chair: I'm sorry. I'm now going to pass it over to Sonia online.

Sonia, you have the floor for five minutes.

Ms. Sonia Sidhu (Brampton South, Lib.): Thank you, Madam Chair. I think Lisa was the....

• (1655)

The Chair: Go ahead, Lisa.

[Translation]

Ms. Lisa Hepfner (Hamilton Mountain, Lib.): I was ready, but I think my colleague Mrs. Vien read my mind, because she wanted to talk about the same thing.

[English]

I think everyone on this committee is in favour of a red dress alert. That's not even a question. We're all in favour of it being indigenous-led and culturally appropriate. Really, what we're trying to nail down in this study is what it will look like and the best way to approach this next.

As my colleague Michelle Ferreri mentioned, a phenomenal witness earlier this week set up her own red dress alert system in her community in Nova Scotia. I can't remember what she called it—it was something else. She managed to get, I think, 4,000 people signed up to receive these alerts. She is managing the whole thing herself, but it's very effective because the people receiving the alerts have all signed up. They are all engaged. They go on and share these alerts on their social media pages and it has a very far reach. She's had extraordinary success in helping to find and save indigenous women, girls and 2SLGBTQIA people. I think 96% was the success rate.

Maybe, Lisa Cooper, you can talk to us about this model and whether this would work across the country. The other model we have is the Amber alert, for example. It is a national platform, but it's rolled out and managed by provinces and territories that decide the parameters on when the alert is going to roll out.

Maybe you can comment on some of these different models and how you think it would work best.

Ms. Lisa Cooper: We didn't really create a model with our action plan. It was more or less a learning lesson from the Summer Kneebone case.

We were lucky enough in our searches that we had volunteers who were non-indigenous allies and members from the community she was from. We were lucky enough to reach an instructor from New Brunswick or Nova Scotia who was teaching a law course, and he got his students involved online. While we were doing the search, he had his students online, and they were able to track a vehicle that was similar to hers. Because of using social media and the people who connected through social media in his classroom, we were able to track this vehicle down. It was just recently sold. It wasn't the actual vehicle.

I think it's dead-on what they're thinking, which is to not depend only on indigenous communities but on Canadians in general. When there's a call-out and a process that you can utilize, a common social media platform you can utilize, you would be amazed at how many people will get on there, especially the younger generation, because they're much more technologically witty than me. I don't use social media very often. The number of people we had was close to 400 and 500 if you looked at social media.

The Amber alert is something I use as an example, but I think that this one needs to be indigenous-led, and I think it needs to be not only indigenous but non-indigenous, because they are allies. They can share the information and the resources they have. It's like giving you 500 sets of eyes. You can almost track somebody down with 500 sets of eyes, so they are really dead-on. I don't want to use examples because I might be mistaking them. They're very correct, and social media is the way to go. If you're using an Amber alert, there need be connections to each other. We need to be able to connect to other organizations far and wide.

We have a person here who's from Newfoundland, an indigenous person at risk. I have one from Ontario. If you look at Chantel Moore, she wasn't from New Brunswick, but she was one who got murdered by a police officer through a wellness check. I think there's such an impact across Canada that it doesn't matter where you're from.

Ms. Lisa Hefner: You make a good point, that often when indigenous people are kidnapped, they're not kept in the same spot. They're moved off. They're moved off to a different province or a different part of the country, so it makes sense that this is national in scope.

On the idea of Jennifer's red dress alert in Nova Scotia, people sign up for it. Do you see this is as being something that goes to everyone's cellphone or something that people sign up to receive? She got lots of non-indigenous allies signed up, but these are people who said, "Yes, I want to know, and I want to help when someone

goes missing." I think that's a big difference with the Amber alert system we have now. Would you support something like that?

The other thing about having people sign up is that you get their land lines if they don't have cellphones. You can reach people in remote areas other ways, not just by trying to send messages to cellphones. Maybe you can reflect on that.

• (1700)

Ms. Lisa Cooper: I think that's a great system.

In P.E.I., we don't have a lot of sex trafficking. It's more couch surfing and taking advantage of homeless women. However, sex trafficking is there, and they do move them quickly from province to province, so I think, if you were to set up a system like that....

Look at Idle No More and how quickly that started with some youth and then went Canada-wide, the whole Idle No More movement. Look how many people are involved, and they're still talking about it. If you look at Black Lives Matter, social media platforms nowadays are the way to go if you're trying to share information. I don't think it would be hard to set something up where people can join in on the talk, join in on the discussion and do a quick check. There might be somebody missing on P.E.I.. Anyone might want to share their picture or might want to share this.

I think there also needs to be a lot of consultation and discussion around that, because there are privacy acts that I think you need to be careful of, and I think you need to be careful of someone's privacy if they don't want to be found.

The Chair: Thanks so much.

Ms. Lisa Hefner: That's what I was going to say. There are some people who don't want to be found for good reasons.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you so much.

Thanks for that, Lisa.

We're going to Andréanne Larouche for the next six minutes.

Go ahead, Andréanne.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Andréanne Larouche: Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

I'm going to take my time, because I want to thank the witnesses, Jessica Savoy and Lisa Cooper, who are very interesting.

I'm a little shocked every time I speak on this issue. It boggles my mind that we're talking about a red dress alert in 2024. I can't believe that so many indigenous women and girls are victims of so much violence. It shocks me, but I'll get my act together.

I'll now ask you some questions, Ms. Savoy and Ms. Cooper. I invite both of you to answer the first one. To make it simple, let's say that Ms. Cooper can answer first.

I like to use international initiatives on a lot of things. We can learn from them and use them to prepare our reports here in committee.

Some states in the United States have already implemented this alert system for missing indigenous women and girls, including California, Colorado and Washington state, and there are various criteria for triggering an alert. For example, there's the number of days that have passed since a person disappeared and the belief that the person is in danger. My colleague Mrs. Vien raised the issue of criteria, but I'd like you to come back to that.

Have you looked at how the criteria have been established elsewhere in the world? I mentioned the United States, but if you know of any interesting initiatives in other countries, feel free to talk about them.

[English]

Ms. Lisa Cooper: I would have to do some research on that.

For me on P.E.I.—I can only speak of my experience—when there's a missing person, they do put an alert out. It kind of goes to all our phones and there is an alert sound that comes. It says that there's a missing youth and please contact.... It doesn't have to necessarily be a murdered person. It could be a missing person. It could be somebody of interest that they're looking for. It is an alert sound that comes on our phones.

We go onto it, and it says they're looking for this person and you can notify.... Sometimes it could be a runaway who they later say has been found.

When you're looking at something like an Amber alert or a red dress alert, it can be the same concept, especially when you're looking at the most vulnerable who are homeless and living on the streets or couch surfing. They are the most vulnerable. If they're not contacting their family on a regular basis.... It took 10 days before this alert went.

We are now prepared for any alert or anything that's a red flag in our community. For indigenous women who are homeless and who we work with among the tent city, if we don't see them in the next day or two or three days—we have mobile teams out—we sound the alert within our organization. Then we start working with the police to sound that alert in the higher sense of putting it out to the province.

Again, talking to organizations that actually do the frontline work is realistic. There's no disrespect. There's the theoretical model. I'm not going to read off the MMIWG report—I spent three years creating that—and the MMIWG action plans. The theoretical models just don't work in most places. Each community has to develop a model that works for their community.

How impacted is the community? How involved is the community? How far-reaching is the community?

On P.E.I., we have three zones—Prince, Kings and Queens counties—so we can reach the whole island. Mine's a model that fits P.E.I., but I think each indigenous community has to fit its own model into this. I don't think we can put it into being a check-box thing. It's basically drawn from the community.

• (1705)

[Translation]

Ms. Andréanne Larouche: Ms. Savoy, I saw you nodding your head. Do you have anything to add about the experience of other countries in terms of criteria?

[English]

Ms. Jessica Savoy: Thank you for your question. I know there was another question asked, and I would like to build on what was already said.

However, in regard to criteria or other supports that could be extended, I just want to give an example of something that had been done to address missing and murdered indigenous women and girls in British Columbia. As a commitment to truth and reconciliation, Rogers Communications placed three towers along Highway 16.

Highway 16 is known as the “Highway of Tears” due to the high number of indigenous women and girls reported missing from the highway. I just want to make note of that.

Also, around other supports that could be extended, there was a conversation or a question asked about how we reach communities that may not have access to cellphones or that type of technology. I feel like we really need to be looking at the intersectionality of overlapping oppressions that impact our communities and, more so, our indigenous women and girls.

I think there are lots of supports that can be extended, and through that what is really needed are the human, technological and fiscal capacities within our communities to address the issues.

Non-status and off-reserve communities have felt the greatest impact of these colonial policies. I think to ensure that we are keeping our communities safe, there need to be more measures in regard to economic, social, cultural and political advancement within our communities to address the ongoing violence that our indigenous women and girls and two-spirit and gender-diverse people are facing.

I'm not sure if that answers your question.

The Chair: Yes, that's perfect. Thank you.

Actually, I have to push over to the next person.

Thank you so much, Andréanne.

I'm going to pass over to Leah Gazan for six minutes.

Ms. Leah Gazan: Thank you so much to the witnesses. I'm so happy to have you here.

I just want to follow up.

I know, Ms. Cooper, that you spoke about alerts, and one of the questions was about being able to sign up for them. I know that in the consultations one of the concerns that were brought up was that violence against indigenous women and girls has been so normalized. We know that in calls for justice 9.1 to 9.11, with policing in society, the concern is that by making it optional, people will choose not to sign up on a wide scale.

What do you think of that analysis?

I have a second very quick question for you, because I'd like to make sure I have time for Ms. Savoy as well. It sounds like yours is community-led. I would assume it's also women-led. Why is that important? Is it women-led, and why is it important that it's community-led prior to going into existing systems that seem to be failing?

Ms. Lisa Cooper: Those are really good questions.

I think that people have to have a choice. You can't force people to sign up. You can do a lot around the education of why it's important to sign up and do a lot of promotion out there and campaigns on why it's important to sign up, but ultimately you can't force people to sign up. Really, it's their choice.

For the second question, we have a number of programs. I have over 60 staff and 30 programs, so we not only address missing and murdered indigenous women and girls, but missing and murdered indigenous men and boys. We use CAP's Walking in Her Moccasins model to work with men, because if we're going to keep our women safe, we have to ensure that men provide the support and advocacy for women and women's groups as well. We want to show our males how to be a healthy male. A lot of that has been taken away as a result of colonialism, as the role of the gatherer of food and bringing home the food, and the warm, protecting woman has been changed through residential schools and the Sixties Scoop.

Now we're looking at redefining the man's role in the family, so I think they go nicely in partnership.

Our missing and murdered indigenous women and girls program has a committee that is all girls. If we have a session, we also do MMIWG with MMIMB as well, so we combine the two in support. Our action plan is built directly from the community up, so it goes out to our community and it does input.

We understand, through Summer Kneebone's experience, what needed to get done. We're still dealing with that, even though it was in 2023, because it still takes time to get through the courts. The families want answers now. They want to understand now, and they're angry.

• (1710)

Ms. Leah Gazan: Thank you so much.

Ms. Savoy, yours is a very critical voice. You're clearly a leader in this area, but you are also providing a youth perspective. You've spoken a lot about systemic violence, especially in policing. I want you to expand on that more.

What would that oversight look like going forward, considering the current system and current relationships? What's the solution to that?

Ms. Jessica Savoy: Thank you for your question.

With regard to the relationship between police forces, the justice system and indigenous peoples.... Oftentimes, over different jurisdictions, we see the increase of the budget for different police services. I think what is really needed is an allocation of wraparound services for our families. We need to be able to advance the social and economic gaps that are related to addressing ongoing violence against indigenous women, girls and two-spirit people.

I hope that answered your question.

Ms. Leah Gazan: Yes, it did.

In the city I'm from, Winnipeg, we've actually had six deaths that involved police in past three months. A couple were related to mental health.

Looking at prevention, because, of course, we're talking about the red dress alert.... We never want to have to issue one, because people should be safe. Do you think having more mental health supports in place and safe places for people to go to would help prevent some of the vulnerabilities currently in place?

Ms. Jessica Savoy: Without a doubt.

Culture and access to culture are preventative measures. We need more preventative measures, rather than reactionary measures. Definitely, we need more mental health services, for sure.

Ms. Leah Gazan: Do wraparound supports, for you, come before a red dress alert or after a red dress alert?

Ms. Jessica Savoy: I think it's womb to tomb. We need those wraparound services for our families, from the moment of conception until, hopefully, a good way to end or whatever happens.

Yes, we need wraparound services for our families—it's so dire—before a red dress alert happens.

Ms. Leah Gazan: Thank you so much.

I have 10 seconds, but I love that “womb to tomb”. It's pretty powerful.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thanks very much.

Because of our time, what I am going to do is drop it down to four minutes, four minutes, two minutes and two minutes.

I am going to pass the floor over to Michelle. You have the floor for four minutes.

Ms. Michelle Ferreri: Is it not your turn?

The Chair: Anna, you have the floor for four minutes.

Mrs. Anna Roberts: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you to both of the witnesses. That was some very powerful information for us.

I'd like to ask Jessica a question. I'm looking into the "Looking Out for Each Other" project. It's an amazing project that's getting the community involved.

My question for you is how you feel about both the indigenous police and the RCMP working closer together. The reason I ask this question is that we, the status of women committee, did a tour last year and one of the things I learned, which I wasn't aware of before, is that people will kidnap children or women and take them across the country before you know it.

If we were to work together, do you think that would help prevent some of these situations, Jessica?

Ms. Jessica Savoy: Thank you very much for your question.

I think I mentioned before that there is an intersectionality of overlapping oppression facing our communities. I believe there needs to be a partnership between all sectors—whether it's with justice, health care or child welfare—and indigenous peoples. It needs to be indigenous-led, but, of course, because the federal government has a fiduciary responsibility for status, non-status, Métis and Inuit peoples, that underlying support needs to be there.

Definitely, without a doubt, different sectors, whether they be justice or others, need to be working with indigenous communities.

• (1715)

Mrs. Anna Roberts: How do we educate our youth? How do—

The Chair: I have to interrupt for one moment.

The bells are ringing. I'm going to ask for unanimous consent from our committee to continue until 5:25.

Can I have unanimous consent?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: Go ahead, Anna.

Mrs. Anna Roberts: Thank you, Madam Chair.

How can we educate our youth so that they are aware of these situations? How can we educate men so they understand they need to be more respectful of women? What do you see as lacking in that?

Ms. Jessica Savoy: When I think about youth, I think about the child welfare system. There is a link between MMIWG and Canada's child welfare system. Also, how can we be empowering youth? It's about having more preventative measures within our communities. I mentioned before that we need more supports in our grassroots communities. We need human, technological and fiscal capacities in order to lead and protect our communities in good ways.

To answer your question, there need to be more culturally appropriate services and youth empowerment initiatives within communities in order to empower our children, youth and families, and al-

so our men, so that all men in our greater community and society can do better to combat the crisis of missing and murdered indigenous women, girls, two-spirit and gender-diverse people.

Thank you.

Mrs. Anna Roberts: I read a book called *If I Go Missing*—I'm not sure if you've read it—by Brianna Jonnie. She doesn't hold back. She was 14 years old when she wrote the book. She admits that her father was a drug addict and an abuser. It was the strong will of her mom who helped raise her so that she could do.... Obviously, she's done amazing things.

I always feel that, as mothers, whether we have sons or daughters—I have one of each—it's our responsibility to show respect so women are not revictimized by their male counterparts—

The Chair: You have 10 seconds to respond.

Ms. Jessica Savoy: I didn't hear a question.

The Chair: Was there a question?

Okay. There was no question. I'm sorry. I have to pass it on. We are continuing.

Sonia and Marc, you have the floor.

I'll start with Sonia for four minutes.

Ms. Sonia Sidhu: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you to all the witnesses for insightful, valuable testimony.

Thank you, Leah, for your advocacy.

My first question is this: We know many indigenous languages are spoken in Canada. On the last panel, on Tuesday, we heard from Ms. Jesty about how her model is unique because it allows first nations chiefs to broadcast alerts using their own words in their own languages, making the alert more accessible.

Could you talk about the importance of making sure these alerts are accessible in indigenous languages?

Ms. Cooper, you can answer that question.

After that, Madam Chair, it's over to Marc.

Ms. Lisa Cooper: It is absolutely good to have your own indigenous language. Unfortunately, I don't speak Mi'kmaq. Mi'kmaq was taken from my mother as a residential school survivor, so I wasn't fortunate enough to learn it. If the alert were done in the Mi'kmaq language, I wouldn't know it.

A lot of urban people have lost our languages. A lot of urban communities have multiple languages. I'm on Mi'kmaq territory—my ancestral homeland. My mother was born and raised here, and so was I, but we are also urban and service Cree, Ojibwa, Tlingit, Algonquin, Mohawk.... I think it's great to see an indigenous on-reserve community that was able to keep its languages. However, when you are looking at urban centres, you often have multiple languages and nations.

I don't know if that would be a very effective way to do it. I'm not saying it can't be done. If they're Inuit and it's put out nationally in Inuit followed by English and French, or something along that line.... However, I don't know if I would be in support of a call-out in the Mi'kmaq language, which I wasn't, unfortunately, ever able to speak and which my mother lost because of the residential school. I think that would miss the mark in some places.

There are some Inuit communities that speak very fluently, and I love that. If you are looking at those communities, absolutely. However, if you are looking at missing and murdered across Canada, how many languages are you willing to put it out in? That would be my question.

• (1720)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Marc Serré (Nickel Belt, Lib.): Thank you, Madam Chair.

I'd also like to thank the witnesses.

Obviously, this is a crisis, a tragedy. It's a real shame.

I want to thank Ms. Gazan for bringing this study to the committee. I think we should have two or three more meetings, because we need more time to hear from witnesses. We heard at the previous meeting about the senior officials responsible for emergency management. I think the committee should invite the federal representative of that organization, as well as the president who represents the 10 provinces and three territories.

Earlier, Ms. Cooper talked about the models of the alert system. Quebec, for example, has insisted on having SILVER alerts, particularly for finding people with dementia.

Why can't the federal government or a province add a red dress alert to its national system? I don't understand why it hasn't been done yet.

[*English*]

Ms. Savoy, what would you have to say to the SOREM committee right now, nationally? Why have they not included murdered indigenous women as missing in the alert system? Why has that not happened?

The Chair: You have 10 seconds to respond.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Marc Serré: Ms. Savoy, my question is for you.

[*English*]

Ms. Jessica Savoy: Hi—

The Chair: I hate to do this, but we do have to cut you off because we are so tight. If there is an answer that you have for that, we would greatly appreciate it in writing so that we can get it.

I'm going to pass the floor over to Andréanne Larouche for two minutes.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Andréanne Larouche: Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

Once again, I want to thank Jessica Savoy and Lisa Cooper.

I'd like to come back to something that was discussed at the last committee meeting.

Ladies, you both talked about the importance of social networks in reaching out to people in the event of a disappearance. Social media, the red dress alert and traditional means make it possible to contact people who could not be reached through technology. I'm thinking, for example, of initiatives like the one we discovered last year when we went around airports during the tour of the Standing Committee on the Status of Women on the study on human trafficking. I'm talking about the “not in my city” awareness campaign at airports: posters of missing persons and women are posted at airports.

How can we combine approaches? How important is it to combine that with traditional posters to be able to save as many people as possible?

[*English*]

Ms. Lisa Cooper: I think we can expand that to airports. We could expand that to bus stops. I've seen them in bathrooms, the posters. You shut the door and there's a picture there. I think there are so many opportunities.

In some places, because of technology—I'm technologically challenged, so you'll have to excuse me—there could be videos on a screen in an airport, where pictures are being shown while people are waiting to board an airplane, or for a bus at a bus stop. There are so many opportunities now where you can have multimedia to help with the large amount.... If you're now sharing this Canada-wide, then you're looking at how many missing and murdered indigenous women a day?

I'll leave it in case Jessica would like to speak to that.

Ms. Jessica Savoy: Yes. Thank you.

I want to refer back to call for justice 2.4. It calls on “governments to provide the necessary resources and permanent funds required” for the preservation and revitalization of indigenous cultures and languages. As you know, we have lost so much due to colonialism and residential schools.

I'll leave it at that and refer to that call for justice.

The Chair: Jessica, I hate cutting you off because you have so much to add. I do apologize.

Leah, you have the last two minutes.

Ms. Leah Gazan: Thank you.

My last question is for Ms. Savoy.

You spoke about the child welfare system. It's really been called a pipeline for murdered and missing indigenous women and girls. We know that a lot of folks who are part of the child welfare system don't have a connection to community or family, and they often become murdered or missing.

How would an urban alert be different from a rural alert in taking that into account?

• (1725)

Ms. Jessica Savoy: It's a great question.

I think we could utilize what's already been done in regard to the Amber alert. I know that Lisa mentioned something about asking people if they're interested in receiving these types of alerts, but I think it's important to note that 80% of indigenous peoples live off reserve across this country. Oftentimes, if a child is taken away from their family, they are off reserve. There definitely need to be implementation and initiatives to really draw the link between MMIWG and Canada's child welfare system.

I'll just leave it at that. I'm not sure, Lisa, if there's time for more.

The Chair: Okay.

Ms. Lisa Cooper: I would quickly add that the federal government should look at making sure there's clean water. It hasn't done that very well. It should make sure there is Internet in all places, including rural places, because that's where people are at risk. Even if they have some sort of dial-up, at least it's a start. That has to be a federal investment.

The Chair: Perfect.

On behalf of the committee, I would like to thank Jessica and Lisa for coming today. This has been absolutely fantastic.

We agreed to end at 5:25. It's 5:26, so today's meeting is adjourned.

• (1730)

Thank you very much to everybody.

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