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# Standing Committee on Indigenous and Northern Affairs

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Chair: Terry Sheehan





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• (1535)

[English]

**The Chair (Terry Sheehan (Sault Ste. Marie—Algoma, Lib.)):** I call this meeting to order.

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

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2) and the motion adopted by the committee on Wednesday, September 24, 2025, the committee is commencing its study of indigenous policing and public safety.

I would like to welcome our witnesses. As an individual, we have Doris Bill, a former chief of the Kwanlin Dün First Nation. With us from Chiefs of Ontario, we have Ontario Regional Chief Abram Benedict. Thank you very much for being here. By video conference from the Sûreté du Québec, we have Robert Durant, captain and director of the Val-d'Or RCM service centre.

I want to make sure that people are adhering to the rules on interpretation devices. We've had some problems in the past. If you're not speaking, please make sure that the earpieces are on the little circle with the earpiece on it. Make sure your mics are off after you finish speaking. If you see any mics on around you, make sure they're off so that we don't get any feedback for the interpreters.

[Translation]

Thank you very much.

[English]

I would like to turn it over to the witnesses. We will hear them in the same order as I introduced them.

Please, go ahead, Doris.

**Doris Bill (Former Chief of Kwanlin Dün First Nation, As an Individual):** Good afternoon. Thank you for this opportunity.

*Dànnch'e.* My name is Doris Bill. I'm a former chief of the Kwanlin Dün First Nation. I served for nine years, from 2014 to 2023.

Kwanlin Dün is a self-governing first nation with over 1,000 citizens. Shortly after I was elected, our community was deeply shaken by the murder of an indigenous woman. On the heels of this, an elderly man was also murdered. Neither individual was a citizen of Kwanlin Dün, but their deaths had a devastating impact on our community nonetheless.

Living in the heart of Whitehorse has its challenges. At the time, most of the crime in Kwanlin Dün was not committed by our citizens, but as I previously stated, these events threw our community into a full-blown crisis. Women were sleeping with baseball bats by their beds. Elders were afraid to go out for walks. We had entire families sleeping in their basement because they were terrified. Citizens told us it was not a safe place to live.

We knew we had to do something, so we started by talking to our citizens about safety in our community. Our citizens told us they felt safer when there was somebody out there watching. Despite having the main RCMP detachment less than a mile away, they still felt unsafe and unprotected. Citizens feared calling the police or didn't trust that they would get justice. Some remembered the days when they were dragged to residential schools by the RCMP. They just did not like the western system of justice.

Using the information citizens gave us, combined with real-time statistics from the RCMP, bylaw and emergency services, the community safety officers, or CSO, program was created, becoming the eyes and ears of the community. The program is proactive, preventative, culturally appropriate and trauma-informed. It was built from the ground up, not from the top down. It is consistent with the TRC, the MMIWG action plan and the Yukon's MMIWG2S+ strategy.

The CSO program has saved lives. It has saved women from situations that could have turned out very badly. The CSO officers have the ability to respond early and de-escalate situations before they turn into a crisis. The program helps to rebuild the trust between the community and the RCMP. The CSOs are not focused on surveillance, enforcement or punishment. In our case, the CSO program is the conduit to all other agencies.

I believe the mainstream justice system needs to create the space for community-born safety initiatives like the community safety officers program. In the Yukon, we have circle sentencing and other forms of traditional justice initiatives developed by first nations people. If these initiatives were not in place, I believe incarceration rates of first nation people would be much higher.

While the CSO program has been successful, it has been without stable, equitable or legislative support. The funding and policy structures of the federal or territorial governments are not built for first nation approaches.

You will hear from the House of Wolf later on about the structure, what that structure could look like and how we can finally make safety equitable, accountable and, most of all, built by us. In the spirit of our agreements, we urge you to walk with us in this journey to bring back safety and trust to our communities.

I'm going to leave it there. I understand I only have five minutes.

**The Chair:** Thank you very much, Doris. You'll have plenty of time to expand during questions as well. Thank you very much.

Grand Chief Benedict, go ahead please.

**Regional Chief Abram Benedict (Ontario Regional Chief, Chiefs of Ontario):** *Shé:kon sewakwé:kon.*

Good afternoon to all of you. Thank you for the opportunity.

I am Abram Benedict. I am the Ontario regional chief representing the Chiefs of Ontario. The Chiefs of Ontario advocates and supports 133 first nations across Ontario.

There's an urgent crisis building in our communities. I'll begin with a stark reality. Just last week, Nishnawbe Aski Nation, which represents 49 northern Ontario first nation communities, declared a state of emergency after yet another drug-related shooting—this one in Ginoogaming First Nation, which left one person dead and another critically injured. This tragedy, sadly, underscores the escalating wave of gang violence and illegal drug trafficking devastating our first nations and our first nations in the north.

Perhaps one of the most devastating parts of this senseless tragedy is that it doesn't come as a surprise or a shock to anyone. We hear of these incidents on a weekly basis, sometimes more. As one first nation leader observed, if these events were happening in southern Ontario, the response would be immediate. For us, there is silence. In NAN territory alone, the police have recorded a 300% increase in cocaine and fentanyl seizures from 2023 to 2024. This is stark evidence of a growing crisis.

These stories, sadly, are not isolated. Some first nation communities face violent crime rates that are higher than the provincial averages, yet they must confront these threats with a fraction of police resources, often with just one officer for an entire community. This is a glaring double standard that exists in public safety forcing first nations to tolerate conditions that are unacceptable anywhere else. The consequences are measured in lives lost, community traumatization and a growing danger, which grows day by day.

In March 2024, the Auditor General found that Public Safety Canada had “poorly managed” the first nations and Inuit policing program and “did not work in partnership with Indigenous commu-

nities to provide equitable access to police services that are tailored to the needs of communities.” I know that first nation policing is different across the board. That's why it's important that it be tailored to the needs of those communities. The audit revealed that \$13 million of programming funds intended for 2022-23 went unspent, even though our police services continue to be chronically underfunded.

The Auditor General officials reinforced these findings to the committee last week, noting that the program remains mismanaged and that neither Public Safety nor the RCMP has treated first nations as true partners. As a former grand chief of the community of Akwesasne, I can attest to partnerships between policing agencies and how extremely important they are. The community of Akwesasne, which I live in, borders Canada, the United States, Ontario and Quebec. I can tell you, on behalf of that community, their success in enforcement and keeping the community safe is built on relationships. For the RCMP and Public Safety not to value relationships with first nations or to treat them as partners is a failure.

For years, the government has pledged to fix first nation policing. In 2021, the public safety minister's mandate letter talked about the codevelopment of legislation recognizing first nation policing as an essential service, yet rather than structural changes, we continue to see temporary, inadequate solutions. When emergencies arise, it is too often short-term funding patches or pilot projects when we instead need systemic reform.

● (1545)

First nation leaders and police chiefs are united in saying that piecemeal fixes are not enough. Leadership implores you. We need to make more than band-aid fixes. We need culturally grounded policing, major investments and structural changes. We need policing that revolves around community priorities and community traditions, and that is rooted in and has the confidence of their first nations. This starts with significant investments that are equitable for our communities.

Our officers and communities are doing everything they can to maintain safety. It is time for Canada to move beyond the rhetoric and deliver lasting changes. Our communities are requiring this.

In the face of inaction, Ontario first nations have put forward our own plan. At a special chiefs assembly in August 2025, Ontario chiefs unanimously passed the Chiefs of Ontario resolution 25/13S entitled “Fix the Federal Program for First Nations Policing”. This resolution calls on Canada to work with first nations to overhaul the program through first nations-led processes that address the specific needs of our communities. It calls for guaranteed adequate, effective and equitable policing for first nations, including policing rooted in our cultures and traditions, backed by funding to enforce first nations laws, bylaws and community safety measures. It calls to enact essential-service legislation that recognizes first nations police services as essential and affirms our jurisdiction over policing.

I want to reiterate that: jurisdiction. In order for communities to have self-determining rights to govern themselves and to have adequate, proper police services, there must be recognition of jurisdiction.

Ontario first nations are ready and willing partners in carrying this work out. I want to acknowledge the work that has been done thus far, but we have a lot more work to do. We need Ontario and Canada to show political willingness to work with us and finally fix a system that is broken.

I want to thank the committee for this opportunity. I'm here to reiterate that we must work together. The Government of Canada must continue to support first nations and acknowledge that first nations policing is an inherent jurisdiction that must be led by first nations communities.

*Nya weh.*

● (1550)

**The Chair:** Thank you, Grand Chief.

Now we go to Captain Durant for five minutes.

[*Translation*]

**Captain Robert Durant (Director of Val-d'Or RCM Service Centre, Sûreté du Québec):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Ladies and gentlemen, good afternoon, *kwe*.

Allow me to introduce myself. I'm Captain Robert Durant, director of the Val-d'Or RCM Service Centre for the Sûreté du Québec. With great respect and appreciation, I thank you for having me here today to present to you an initiative that is very important to us, the joint indigenous community police station, which we commonly refer to as the PPCMA.

Before going into detail, allow me to share with you the values that guide our work: service, professionalism, respect, integrity and, above all, solidarity or *mamawi*, which means “together”. These values aren't just words; they are the foundation of our commitment to communities, particularly first nations, with whom we have built relationships of trust over the years. In Val-d'Or, we chose to do things differently. We decided to go outside the traditional framework and rethink our ways of responding to better meet the real needs of vulnerable people and members of indigenous communities. That means being present on the ground, listening and, above all, being close to people. This approach requires courage, flexibility and a sincere desire to change things.

Val-d'Or is a city facing a variety of social problems, including a vulnerable clientele who are experiencing social breakdown and are affected by addiction, mental health problems, poverty and homelessness. This vulnerable clientele includes a significant proportion of people from various first nations communities.

Faced with this reality, the Sûreté du Québec began working in 2015 to develop alternative solutions to ensure public safety, respond to vulnerable indigenous and non-indigenous clientele, actively participate in bringing people together and find alternative and sustainable solutions that align with the values and culture of the indigenous people and the residents of Val-d'Or, while also obeying current laws.

● (1555)

It was in this context that the *Équipe mixte d'intervention-policiers*, or EMIPIC, was born in November 2015. At the time, this team included a police officer and a social worker trained to work with vulnerable people, both indigenous and non-indigenous.

This team plays a critical role. They work with people in vulnerable situations to encourage quick referral to assistance resources tailored to their needs, so that their situation doesn't worsen. They also provide second-line response behind police officers in the Vallée-de-l'Or RCM when a situation involves a vulnerable, intoxicated or homeless person. In addition, they make it easier for homeless people and residents to live together in harmony. They also contribute to developing and implementing prevention strategies, particularly in relation to substance abuse, violence and homelessness. Finally, they defuse situations using an adapted and integrated community approach.

We quickly realized that EMIPIC was not enough to meet the growing demand, so we launched a pilot project in November 2016: the joint indigenous community police station, or PPCMA, which is located in downtown Val-d'Or. The PPCMA's response philosophy is rooted in partnership, in order to identify a joint response through co-operation and concerted action among the stakeholders concerned. The goal is to foster a culturally safe community approach based on the real needs of the vulnerable clientele. To do that, we must respond upstream and provide human support, which aims to direct clients to appropriate services other than the justice system.

In July 2019, the PPCMA was formalized as a permanent Sûreté du Québec station. Since then, the team has included a postmaster, 11 police officers and four social workers from a partnership with the Centre intégré de santé et des services sociaux de l'Abitibi-Témiscamingue. From 2018 to 2020, we also benefited from the Pikogan community loaning us an indigenous police officer and a civilian employee. Unfortunately, that loan was suspended because their community lacked resources. Steps have been taken in other communities, but they are in the same situation: They are short-staffed.

The success of the PPCMA has inspired other regions. EMIPIC teams have been set up in five other municipalities: Roberval, Chibougamau, Joliette, Maniwaki and Sept-Îles. The teams are adapted to local realities, with support from indigenous liaison officers and other collaborators from indigenous friendship centres or partner organizations.

What we've put in place in Val-d'Or is more than a policing model. It's a humane, respectful approach deeply rooted in a desire to live together in harmony. I encourage you to watch the videos that show the PPCMA's success stories. They demonstrate the meaningful impact of our work on the ground and, above all, the strong partnership between police services and the communities. I will forward the links to those videos to the clerk.

Thank you for your attention, *meegwetch*.

[English]

**The Chair:** Thank you very much.

We'll now go to questions.

MP Schmale, you have six minutes.

**Jamie Schmale (Haliburton—Kawartha Lakes, CPC):** Thank you very much, Chair.

Thank you to our witnesses for being here today on a very important topic, which we are diving into because of the ongoing need to see changes to this system. As we learned in our last meeting, real fundamental changes to the way the department manages indigenous policing have not been made in many years. It's long overdue. I believe 2014—that was the date they gave us—was the last time it was even looked at. That's absolutely mind-boggling, given the fact that there are so many more challenges that we seem to be dealing with.

I also want to pass along our condolences on the terrible shooting of that 27-year-old man up in northern Ontario. Tragic events like this need to stop.

Grand Chief Benedict, maybe I can start with you. An October 11 CBC article outlines the chain of events that happened. In it, Grand Chief Fiddler talks about the brazen attitude these criminals are taking. They're coming onto reserves in some cases. Chief Fiddler talks about the dealers themselves renting planes to get into reserves that are only accessible by ice road. They are creating dependence with addictions, and it's a mental health crisis. At the same time, it's leading to human trafficking, which is unbelievable. Chief Fiddler goes on to say that these criminals become even more emboldened “because nothing happens to them. Nobody holds them accountable”.

Would you care to reflect on that?

**Regional Chief Abram Benedict:** I can't speak on behalf of Grand Chief Fiddler, but many of our communities are faced with very similar challenges. Sadly, as I mentioned in my opening remarks, the loss of our members due to organized crime is, unfortunately, quite common at this point.

There are a couple of things. The enforcement of first nation community laws is, in many cases, non-existent, whether it be from the RCMP or partnering with the OPP. If it's in regard to our first nation police department, it's the adjudication aspect. There's no recognition of that ability. A community may develop and enact a piece of legislation, a community law that prohibits certain persons or sets parameters for persons entering a community. If they are found to be guilty of a community offence, they would be removed. It's not prosecuted, which is a fundamental flaw in the system.

There is another aspect around accountability or being held accountable for those actions. When persons have been charged, whether it be by the first nation police service or the OPP, they end up going to court in many cases and are released on small bail, on their own recognizance or with conditions that frankly just allow them to go back to doing what they were doing. It's a real problem.

We know that the Government of Canada is considering bail reform. This is real for our people as well. People are offending. The system is broken. People are back out on the streets faster than the police can wrap up an investigation.

• (1600)

**Jamie Schmale:** For those watching or listening at home, it's important to also remind people how we got here. Bill C-5 and Bill C-75 are two pieces of Liberal legislation that were passed that drastically affected the speed at which criminals were let out on bail. With Bill C-5, if you were actually convicted, it reduced the sentences given by judges for those extreme penalties.

It's important to realize that the Liberals are finally thinking about correcting a problem that they basically ignored for many years. Even though they were warned at the time that we were going to get to this spot. This spot is what you're talking about now, the revolving door justice system where criminals don't feel that there are any consequences to their actions. This is causing problems for indigenous and non-indigenous communities.

I remember doing a study on indigenous policing. I can't remember how many years ago. It's pre-pandemic, I believe. The exact same concerns that you are talking about right now were discussed at that time. Not only that, as you pointed out in your opening remarks, Grand Chief Benedict, in 2019 the prime minister at the time, Mr. Trudeau, directed ministers to start taking a path toward making indigenous policing an essential service. We are now pushing 2026 here. In your opinion, are you shocked it's taking this long?

I don't have much time left. Could you also explain the remaining steps that need to take place in order for that piece, the essential service, and those bylaws that are passed on reserve to be enforced properly?

**Regional Chief Abram Benedict:** Thank you for that.

**The Chair:** Unfortunately, that took us to six minutes. Perhaps you can answer that later on.

Next, we have MP Hanley for six minutes.

**Brendan Hanley (Yukon, Lib.):** Thank you.

Thank you to the three witnesses for being here and for your testimony.

I am going to start with you, Doris, given that you come from Yukon. I know that your journey here was anything but smooth. Thank you for that.

Although we can argue that the pace has been frustratingly slow at times, there has been some background work done. Public Safety Canada issued a report in 2022 on first nation and Inuit policing programs and, in it, one of the findings was:

Support for the exploration and development of alternative models for the delivery of policing services in communities with FNIPP policing agreements could complement or enhance existing approaches and provide flexibility in meeting their unique public and community safety needs.

It goes on to mention “an opportunity to explore and further develop alternative service delivery models that address non-criminal community safety concerns without police intervention.” Then they cite, in terms of examples, where they have provided support.

The first program cited is the Kwanlin Dün First Nation community safety officer program, and we know this has been leading the way for the country. I know that you have had calls not only from around the country—or you did when you were chief—but internationally as well.

I wonder if you can elaborate a bit on the concept of community safety versus indigenous policing and how that partnership with police works within the community as well.

**Doris Bill:** Sure. Thank you for that.

When we first started this program, we had constables from the first nation indigenous policing program and also, combined with that, the community tripartite agreement, and it wasn't working for our community. People would say that we were just not getting the justice we needed in the community. People were very dissatisfied with the service we were getting.

The relationship had fallen apart, and it wasn't just on behalf of the police. It was us as well. We were responsible as well. The relationship had eroded to a point where we had a satellite office in our community and they weren't even there anymore. We barely saw them. The officers would always get pulled away to the larger city, leaving us underpoliced.

When we developed the program, we went about starting to rebuild that relationship, because we understood that while the community safety officers have a job to do, they cover a certain area, a certain jurisdiction. They don't do enforcement. We understood that it is the RCMP's job, and it will always be the RCMP's job.

We had to rebuild that relationship, and I'm pleased to say that today that relationship is working quite well.

The safety officer program now is being replicated throughout the territory. There are other communities that want this program, and they're tailoring it to their own communities. It's amazing how well it's working in some of these communities. We get calls from New Zealand, Germany and New York City—I've been contacted by Black Lives Matter—and all over the place.

It's been absolutely amazing, but I think communities.... You know, for us, it was about taking responsibility for our own safety issues and taking responsibility for the things that were happening in our community. We knew that the RCMP couldn't be everywhere. They just can't do it all. We went to work and built a program where, if someone is released on parole, they have an obligation to contact our CSOs, first and foremost, and they contact our justice department. Then, for that individual, once they're released into our community, we are aware of them. We know where they are and we know what is going on with that individual, and they develop a plan for that person.

I really think that this program can work in other communities, but it needs to be supported. It really needs to be supported.

● (1605)

**Brendan Hanley:** There's so much more to ask you, but anything that you can follow up with, perhaps in written form, in terms of success stories and data would be gratefully appreciated.

Thank you.

**Doris Bill:** One of the things that we did, as well, was implement community prevention through environmental design. We did our own safety assessment and went to work and rebuilt the infrastructure. We took tons of garbage out of our community. We took out old, derelict vehicles and went to work and just tore down old shacks that people were sleeping in at 30 below.

Today, we have citizens who come back from outside and haven't been to Kwanlin Dün in years and say that it's a totally different place. It is a totally difference place. It even feels.... It's the feeling you get when you drive through the community. I watched one citizen's reaction, and she said, “Oh my God, it's so different. It's clean. It's beautiful.”

**The Chair:** That's really good to hear, but we have to wrap it up.

**Doris Bill:** I feel that our people deserve that.

**The Chair:** Perfect.

Thank you, Doris. That's very nice to hear.

[Translation]

Mr. Lemire, you have the floor for six minutes.

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

Captain Durant, thank you for being with us today. I think I'm not mistaken when I say that we ran into each other at the Gabriel Commanda march.

I was interested in having you appear to because, a few years ago, the situation in Val-d'Or situation got a lot of ink for the wrong reasons. Responses were undertaken, including the Viens commission, which was held in Val-d'Or itself to provide solutions to Quebec's situation in particular, but also to Val-d'Or's. You also provided a very concrete response thanks to the joint police service.

What's changed on the ground? We do need to contextualize the increase in homelessness, which is happening everywhere in Quebec and Canada, and which your system has no effect on. That might be making things even better. How have relationships changed on the ground?

**Capt Robert Durant:** Relationships have changed, because from the get-go, people trust us more. We take matters into our own hands through our approach and the social workers. It's not just a matter of responding to a call, resolving the situation quickly and leaving. We really have to get to the bottom of things and deal not with the situation, but with the individual. People often have substance abuse, addiction or mental health problems. These are social issues that were exacerbated by the pandemic. We had some social issues before the pandemic, but they've worsened since then. This approach allows people to receive care from the right person, rather than letting them go through a revolving door, and by that I mean letting them enter and leave the justice system and the health care system.

Val-d'Or is probably the only place in the world where a psychiatrist comes to a police station once a month to provide care to people on the street. It was set up and it's a success, because people with mental health problems don't often go to their appointments. That way, through the EMIPIC, members of the community and other community stakeholders, we make sure that people are taken care of and that the things and the care they receive are tailored to their situation.

As you said, it's changed our day-to-day operations. The best approach we've adopted is to take the time to resolve situations. People often say that the police arrive, resolve the situation and then leave. However, our approach lets us take the time. People help residents do their taxes when they have trouble doing them on their own. They take the time to help them. People go with residents to a store to buy boots, because some are unable to do that, especially when it's cold in the winter. Those are things we can do every day. When people's basic needs are being met, they tend not to cause disorder in public. They are taken care of and things go better for them.

• (1610)

**Sébastien Lemire:** Thank you for that.

In your presentation, you mentioned that it may be harder to recruit indigenous police officers, but also that you worked with the Pikogan community to recruit indigenous police officers.

I understand that you'd like to recruit more indigenous police officers. What's holding you back? Are enough money and resources being invested in this area? Should more positions be offered in schools?

**Capt Robert Durant:** That's a two or three-part question.

First of all, you'd have to ask the Sûreté du Québec, or SQ, about the lack of indigenous police resources, because I don't hire the SQ police officers.

With regard to loans from services like the ones we got from the Pikogan police service, we approached a number of neighbouring communities again so we could try to have police officers in uniform who would come out with us on the ground.

Officer Annick Wylde from Pikogan wore her uniform in public in downtown Val-d'Or, which allowed for a different approach and a more targeted connection with people. In addition, she was easier to approach for some people in the communities.

I haven't done any research on this, but perhaps we could change something in the process to try to attract people, because we would really love young people in our communities to become police officers in our forces. The Cégep de l'Abitibi-Témiscamingue and other facilities in Quebec offer police technology courses. There are also indigenous police force cohorts. I don't know much about this, but I do know that it's pretty hard to recruit people from the communities and that everyone would like to see more indigenous officers. We'd definitely like to have many more. One solution might be to provide better coaching or offer internships to raise awareness of our profession.

**Sébastien Lemire:** I have one last question to wrap up very quickly, because I don't have much time left. Do your police officers or young recruits receive any training on how to interact with members of first nations specifically?

**Capt Robert Durant:** Yes, we have two training courses at the SQ.

The first training is given online, and we learn how to better engage with indigenous peoples. We learn to listen, and we learn a few words and a few ways to do things. The second training lasts two days and takes place right in a community. Here in Abitibi—Témiscamingue, police officers spend two days in the Pikogan community. They meet with people who tell their story and explain how to respond to and interact with indigenous nations. That's basic training for all police officers in Quebec.

Here at the joint indigenous community police station, we've set up additional training in partnership with social workers on how to interact with people experiencing addiction or mental health issues and how to detect problems, so we can defuse situations and keep them from escalating. Therefore, we have several types of training.

The SQ now offers a new training course for all patrol officers: It teaches them how to respond to someone in an unsettled mental state, and encourages them to defuse the situation rather than acting too quickly.

**Sébastien Lemire:** Thank you.

[*English*]

**The Chair:** Thank you very much, Captain. If you want to follow up and send in some of those training courses to the clerk, we can make sure they're attached to the report.

Thank you.

Now for the second round, we have a five-minute round for MP Morin.

**Billy Morin (Edmonton Northwest, CPC):** Thank you, Chair.

[*Member spoke in Plains Cree and provided the following text:*]

Tansi Niwahkamahkanak Nahtohkitopi Nitsikason.

[*Member provided the following translation:*]

Hello all my relatives. My name is Sacred Rider.

[*English*]

Thank you, chiefs, guests, for coming today.

I'd like to build on my colleague's question earlier.

Chief Abram Benedict, the Liberal government in 2022 promised policing would be an essential service after the tragedy at James Smith, amongst many other tragedies that indigenous communities face.

It's been a number of years now. There's a scathing report out by the Auditor General that even the current programs are failing. Do you trust the Liberal government to do what it said and declare it an essential service?

• (1615)

**Regional Chief Abram Benedict:** I'm not here to tell about government trust, especially being a first nation member, but what I can say is that the commitment that was made by the government was around codevelopment, and codevelopment to first nations is different depending on what region you're in.

As the Ontario regional chief, I can say the process is used, and frankly community policing in the south is not the same in central or the north. Therefore, the codevelopment process that the government committed to has occurred, but what has not occurred is that legislation has not been implemented, nor has any been tabled at any point since those commitments were made, which is deeply concerning to us.

This is a program, and it needs to move past that. There's not a police agency, whether it be first nation or non-first nation, that is

not facing a barrage of issues. We need first nation policing to be a legislated program.

**Billy Morin:** Thanks, Chief. I have one more follow-up for you.

You come from Akwesasne. My heritage is Blackfoot. They're border communities. There is Tsawwassen. Across this country, there are border communities all across the medicine line.

Recently the government announced multi-millions of dollars going to a thousand border patrol officers and going to other aspects of protecting our border.

Have they done right by your community when it comes to protecting the Akwesasne border and stopping crime flowing across?

**Regional Chief Abram Benedict:** As a former community member who continues to be a resident of Akwesasne, the system of border safety and security is quite complicated. I do know that not very many agencies, whether it be the RCMP, the CBSA or the Canadian Armed Forces, have a system that moves quickly to get people into these programs and onto the ground, either protecting the border or being RCMP officers. That's a big problem that exists.

I can also tell you that parity between what municipal police agencies or the RCMP and what first nations receive has always been a long-standing issue. In fact, for systems that are broken to bring people in, ones that can be expedited under first nation policing agencies, the salary is not comparable, nor are the benefits. This is a big problem as well.

**Billy Morin:** Thanks, Chief.

Chief Doris Bill, I want to acknowledge some of the strengths you mentioned in terms of self-development and self-determination. Again, I would just highlight a thing that I saw a couple of weeks ago. Kainai created their own justice centre and their own sentencing circles, for lack of a better word. They were quoting a 90% success rate versus the 20% success rate of the provincial circuit courts in the next room over on their reserve. I think the answers to our challenges in indigenous communities lie in the communities themselves, so my hat's off to you.

You mentioned, as the chief did, that there are discrepancies in funding through the first nations and Inuit policing program. Can you comment on the unique aspects of Yukon communities, whether rural or not, and the challenges they face when it comes to policing and the supports they get from the first nations and Inuit policing program? In particular, are they facing challenges in getting supports from that program?

**Doris Bill:** I think it has changed over time. I can't comment on the current situation. I do know that there are 14 communities in the Yukon. Some don't have any policing at all and some have detachments. In Whitehorse we are an urban first nation, so we have a detachment that's located about a mile away from us. However, there were times when we needed the RCMP and they weren't quite there. That relationship was really broken, to a point where our citizens were very frustrated.

I think the safety officer program can help in certain situations. They're not an enforcement body. We surveyed our citizens and 94% said they didn't want the safety officers to be an enforcement body. I really believe that the safety officers can help in situations where there is no policing. They become the eyes and ears of the community. People trust them. It's unbelievable the amount of information they get. That information is then passed on to the RCMP. When major events happen in communities, the safety officers can step in and watch over the community, ensuring that victims get the services they need while the RCMP focus on the major investigations they need to do. We have to work on that relationship and work on educating the RCMP across the country about the program. Many don't understand it. Even MPs, I find, don't understand it. We're constantly having to educate people about it.

Regarding the current relationship, in some cases it works and in some cases it doesn't. I find it's very haphazard.

**The Chair:** Thank you very much for that.

MP Lavack, you have five minutes.

[*Translation*]

**Ginette Lavack (St. Boniface—St. Vital, Lib.):** Good afternoon to the witnesses. Thank you very much for being here today to testify and share information with us. It's very much appreciated.

Ms. Bill, in your remarks, you mentioned circle sentencing. Could you tell us what that represents?

[*English*]

**Doris Bill:** Circle sentencing, in our community anyway, was at times an alternative to the court system. It was a traditional alternative where you would sit in a circle. The victim and the perpetrator would be part of that circle. They would come up with an alternative to the mainstream sentencing type of thing. I believe in some communities it works very well. In some communities it works for a while, and then it falls by the wayside.

There are varying degrees of success with it. It's a traditional alternative that was developed by our people. It's meant to be part of restitution. Individuals are able to talk to the victim and the family and the community. It's restitution to the community. The community is part of that circle.

**Ginette Lavack:** Thank you for that.

Both of you have mentioned or talked about this idea of programs and policing being developed in such a way that it is "culturally grounded".

Can you both perhaps elaborate on what that actually means in practice? What do you see there? What recommendations might

you have that really touch on that aspect and how that could be brought forward better?

• (1625)

**Doris Bill:** In our community, we have many citizens who have been affected by residential school, for instance. Many have substance use issues, and we have a lot of citizens who are on the street. Poverty is a big issue. Cultural alternatives to these issues are extremely important.

One of the things we worked toward, for instance, was a managed alcohol program that was administered by our people. It's very important that our own people develop these alternatives, because we relate to them the best. I believe the communities have the solutions to the issues and the problems that we are seeking. No one can come into our community and develop these solutions. We have seen the federal government come in before and do safety assessments, for instance, and they don't work. It's because our community is not involved. Our community needs to take ownership of these issues and develop solutions that work for our people. No one knows better what those solutions are than our people. We need the resources to develop them.

• (1630)

**Ginette Lavack:** Is there time for Abram to answer?

**Regional Chief Abram Benedict:** Thank you for that.

I think what Doris has talked about is a holistic approach. Some municipal police agencies try to take a holistic approach, but it would not be the same as we'd see in first nation communities. This would be policing grounded in tradition, teaching, ceremony and language, and ensuring that community priorities play a role.

Community policing needs to be driven by the community. When we look at what it means to be culturally grounded, what policing should look like is to be determined by the community.

**The Chair:** Thank you very much.

Now we go to Mr. Lemire for two and a half minutes, please.

[*Translation*]

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

Grand Chief Benedict, I'd like to hear your point of view. Right now in the House of Commons, we're talking about Bill C-2, which is at second reading. We're actually talking about Bill C-12, because Bill C-2 was set aside.

Bill C-12 does not include the provisions of Bill C-2 that affected people's personal information, such as the ability to search their mail. These are things that I think you had some reservations about.

We can't deny that the border issue is important, particularly where you live, in Akwesasne. We hear about gun, drug and human trafficking. Could we bring better solutions for the issue of keeping our borders secure if these elements were managed by an indigenous police force in your area?

[English]

**Regional Chief Abram Benedict:** Absolutely. As I mentioned earlier, I talked about my experience when I was the grand chief of Akwesasne with the integration of the partnerships that exist between the Akwesasne Mohawk Police Service, the RCMP, the Cornwall police, the OPP, the FBI, the Saint Regis Mohawk Tribe and ICE. All of these agencies work together in a partnership. For the most part, if first nations are not treated as partners—which, sadly, across the board they are not in many places, including in first nation policing agencies—we will not see the success. Whether we're securing communities to be safe or whether we're securing the national security of Canada through the borders, first nations must be treated as partners.

[Translation]

**Sébastien Lemire:** If we went beyond a partnership and gave the Akwesasne community and the indigenous police control of operations on your territory, do you think would that produce better results?

[English]

**Regional Chief Abram Benedict:** If first nation policing were made an essential service, yes, absolutely. The resources in Akwesasne are a bit of an anomaly because of the border situation. For the rest of the communities across Canada that are trying to secure their communities, they don't have the same luxury of additional resources because of border communities, but the risks are the same.

[Translation]

**Sébastien Lemire:** Thank you.

Mr. Chair, since I exceeded my speaking time earlier, I will respect it this time.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

[English]

Next, we have Mr. Melillo for five minutes.

**Eric Melillo (Kenora—Kiiwetinoong, CPC):** Thank you, Mr. Chair. I appreciate the opportunity to take part in this important discussion. I want to ask some questions of Chief Benedict.

It's good to see you again. I represent northwestern Ontario, as you know. I think an important move that was made recently is that the Ontario government has recognized the Nishnawbe Aski Police Service as an essential service. You've talked a number of times today about how the circumstances are different among different communities.

Can you speak to how that designation at the provincial level has changed things in the Nishnawbe Aski Police Service versus the other services across the province?

**Regional Chief Abram Benedict:** I'm not intimately involved in those operations, but to go back to my points earlier about first nations determining the best approaches for community policing, the

Nishnawbe Aski Police Service has determined that going under provincial legislation, which is the Ontario Community Safety and Policing Act, is the best way forward for their agency to support their 49 communities.

Not every community may be in that same position. Others.... That's why it's equally important that there's not.... There can't be a national approach to finding community-based solutions for policing. That's quite obvious in many areas. I mean, there's no doubt that the resources need to be there. There's no doubt that the service needs to be essential so that it's equivalent to other policing agencies, but those governance models need to be determined by the communities so that they can determine what model works best for them. Again, it may be under provincial legislation. It may be a hybrid. It may be straight contracting services to the OPP or to a municipal police force. Those decisions need to be made by the communities themselves.

• (1635)

**Eric Melillo:** I appreciate that.

I want to pick up on another previous topic. The thing about going so late in the round is that a lot of the topics have been touched on already, but I think it's important to dive into them again.

Obviously, in the region I represent, northern Ontario—and as you know, Grand Chief—there are a number of remote fly-in communities. I think there is a staggering amount of gang activity, of drugs, firearms and other illegal items being brought into these communities. I think it's, maybe, counterintuitive for a lot of people outside of the north to understand. The communities are isolated. You have to fly in to get to them. I think a lot of people don't recognize, as well, that these are planes—even passenger planes—for which there is no security necessary. You can get on the plane without security and get off the plane without security—without going through security as you normally would at Pearson or other large airports. I just put that on the record for folks who might be watching and are unaware of that.

I think that's an important gap, though, because in these remote first nation communities across northwestern Ontario, the people are in a vulnerable situation. There aren't resources available to watch for people who are transporting things in by plane, sometimes through mail or through a number of other methods.

Could you speak more to that issue, Grand Chief, in terms of that unchecked travel into those remote communities and how police forces could be better equipped to handle that?

**Regional Chief Abram Benedict:** There are a couple of things on that.

What I will say is that, in my experience, sadly, in community policing, organized crime is always one step ahead of policing agencies. Unfortunately, in our northern remote communities, it's the same thing. As first nation police agencies or services are trying to secure communities and keep them safe, responding to the community needs at the same time as trying to ward off organized crime, crime is one step ahead of them. This means that if a community police officer has to fly in, they have to be able to do that. Organized crime can do that quite easily, and we see that all the time in many areas combatting organized crime.

Sadly—and I appreciate you acknowledging the northern remote communities—for communities of several hundred people that are five or six hours away or communities that are remote and fly-in, where you can only get there either by winter road or by airplane, these communities have been exploited by organized crime as well. That means that most people can't get there unless they're trying to get there for a specific purpose, which is to serve the community. For organized crime, it is to exploit the community. That is why first nations policing needs the resources and needs the recognition so that communities can determine what the best approach is for them to secure community safety.

**The Chair:** Thank you very much, Grand Chief. We'll end it here.

I want to thank Doris, as well, for the valuable input.

We're going to suspend for a little bit while we get the next panel up.

Thank you very much.

• (1630) \_\_\_\_\_ (Pause) \_\_\_\_\_

• (1640)

• (1645)

**The Chair:** Welcome back, everyone.

I want to welcome our second panel. We have, from the Assembly of First Nations, Cindy Woodhouse Nepinak, national chief, as well as Julie McGregor, chief of staff. From the Assembly of First Nations Québec-Labrador, we have Francis Verreault-Paul, chief.

Each witness will have five minutes to provide us with some important information, and then we'll have a few rounds of questions so you guys can expand and such.

Thank you very much. Without further ado, I will turn it over to Cindy.

Thank you.

**National Chief Cindy Woodhouse Nepinak (Assembly of First Nations):** Thank you.

This is the most Monday Monday ever. I really hope that tonight we can all unite and make sure our Blue Jays win. Hopefully, we're not too late today, but I just wanted to say that it was a good game yesterday. It took me two hours to get out of there. There were 45,000, mostly Canadians. It was nice to see. Everybody was united, so let's unite. Maybe we can unite behind first nations policing as well and walk with us.

[*Witness spoke in Anishinaabemowin and provided the following text:*]

Aneen, BooZooh, Apiichi-gii-chii-nay-dum Akiinaah o-gii-bii-izah-iing omahh noo-gom.

[*Witness provided the following translation:*]

Hello, I'm very honoured to be with you all and glad you are all able to attend this event today.

[*English*]

Thank you so very much.

For those of you who don't know me, I'm Cindy Woodhouse Nepinak. I'm the national chief of the Assembly of First Nations.

As you know, the Assembly of First Nations is representative of 634 first nations in the country. We try to come together from coast to coast to coast. We gather and try to find our way through common issues. I invite each and every one of you, on December 2, 3 and 4 here in Ottawa, to please come and speak to our first nations. There are so many issues all the time, but we offer an open invitation to this House to join us to work together and find our way through many of these issues we find so dear to make our country the best it can be.

My role as national chief is to always advocate for first nations priorities, as directed by chiefs in assembly, first nations in assembly, to protect our collective and inherent rights. That includes first nations justice.

I'd like to acknowledge that we are here on the territory of the Algonquin nation.

I want to thank the committee for the invitation to appear and the chiefs who are here with us today. We lift up Ontario Regional Chief Benedict for his remarks and leadership on this file earlier today. I also acknowledge my colleague Regional Chief Francis Verreault-Paul, who is joining me here today from Quebec. I'm so proud of him for being here and taking on this work. We've had all of our regional chiefs from coast to coast come in today, and I want to welcome them all to this place.

This December, of course, marks the 10th anniversary of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's historic final report. With this important anniversary, we see a timely opening for substantive discussions about closing the significant gaps that remain in our society between first nations and non-indigenous Canadians. These gaps have perpetuated deep-rooted inequality in Canada, led to poorer health outcomes, unsafe communities, limited education opportunities and less prosperity for first nations compared to other Canadians.

This is why Canada needs to make strategic nation-building infrastructure investments in the next budget to provide basic services for first nations like clean drinking water, quality housing, modern schools for our kids and community safety and policing.

First nations have rights, under the Constitution and international law, to safety and security. Too often, discriminatory police action leads to serious injuries or deaths, overpolicing off reserve, underpolicing on reserve and over-representation of first nations people in federal corrections. When people lack access to adequate and safe housing, schools and community resources, they are often led down a path that ends in the justice system and encounters with police.

To be effective, first nations policing must be rooted in community values, not colonial models. Today, first nations-led police forces—and I recognize we have a few with us here today and thank them for their lifelong service to first nations—are demonstrating how community-based, culturally grounded models of policing can lead to safer, healthier outcomes in all regions. They don't just enforce laws. First nations police embody community values. They lead with peace before force, but they are underappreciated.

The failure of provincial and federal governments to end this discrimination in first nations policing and our justice system contradicts the spirit of reconciliation. Last week, there was another example. We acknowledge Canada's announcement to invest \$1.8 billion over four years to hire 1,000 RCMP officers. Unfortunately, there is no first nations-specific carve-out included in that. We have asked and, to date, have no reply, so we look to this committee to help us with that. Will this be another missed opportunity?

In March 2024—and again this month, in Ottawa—the Auditor General of Canada weighed in. While national police budgets have increased, she concluded that there are few results and that Canada did not even have a fair formula to allocate first nations policing dollars. The Auditor General said the RCMP is receiving first nations policing funds for officers who do not exist. Millions in budgeted police funding has gone unspent.

At our last December assembly, chiefs were united in calling for a federal inquiry into discriminatory police practices after more than a dozen first nations people died in the custody of colonial police forces across Canada last summer and fall.

After police in Manitoba refused to search the landfill for our sisters.... Injustice and crime persist. Chief Benedict described the situation in Ontario. We lift up the Nishnawbe Aski Nation chiefs of Ontario, who declared a state of emergency across their 49 communities, over illicit drugs and gang violence. You will hear this from Quebec chiefs and first nations leaders from across the country.

Chiefs were reassured during the election when Prime Minister Carney recognized first nations policing as an essential service during our AFN forum. He said we must “move as quickly as possible” to ensure delivery of essential services on first nations. He said he wanted to move to self-administered first nations policing services and “to give control over these services” to a range of self-administered policing service agreements and community tripartite agreements.

It's now been almost one year since the Supreme Court weighed in on this issue. In fact, two recent decisions by the Federal Court of Appeal and the Supreme Court confirmed rulings by the Canadian Human Rights Tribunal that funding and negotiations, under the first nations policing program, were discriminatory. Recently, the Canadian Human Rights Commission validated a complaint by the Quebec Association of First Nation and Inuit Police Directors—which represents 22 police services—and transferred the case to the Human Rights Tribunal. They join the Indigenous Police Chiefs of Ontario, which is also engaged in active litigation before the tribunal.

This means nearly all self-administered police services have taken Canada to court over mismanagement of the program and discriminatory funding practices. Three of these services were forced to file for immediate relief in federal court to ensure they had funding and could provide police services to their communities. They also sought immediate changes to restrictive and discriminatory terms and conditions, which Public Safety used to deny requests for the funding increases needed for specialized services to combat gang violence and drug trafficking. While the legal proceedings were ongoing, the Minister of Public Safety unilaterally changed the restrictive terms and conditions, demonstrating that the ineffective program is not a real limitation but rather a choice. This would not be acceptable in any other Canadian community.

● (1650)

Unfortunately, more legal challenges will be heard this year unless Canada acts with deeds as much as it says the words. The situation is dire, but we all know what we need. Thanks to years of research, advocacy and engagement, we all have the knowledge that's necessary around this table. What we need now, of course, is your political will.

*Chi-meegwetch.* Thank you for welcoming us here today.

● (1655)

**The Chair:** Thank you very much.

Chief Francis Verreault-Paul, please go ahead for five minutes.

[*Translation*]

**Chief Francis Verreault-Paul (Assembly of First Nations Quebec-Labrador):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

*Kuei kassinu etashiek.* Ladies and gentlemen of the committee, my name is Francis Verreault-Paul, and I'm the proud *pekuakamiulnu* of the Innu nation. As chief of the Assembly of First Nations Quebec-Labrador, the AFNQL, I thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today on first nations and Inuit policing and public safety. The AFNQL wishes to shed light on the systemic challenges these services face, particularly in Quebec, where there are 22 indigenous police forces, and propose concrete solutions.

First and foremost, I want to commend and acknowledge the exceptional work of our indigenous police officers who are currently on the job and those who have been in the past few years. They are extremely brave. I would also like to acknowledge the work of the Association des directeurs de police des Premières Nations et Inuits du Québec, as well as all the police officers across Turtle Island.

Indigenous police forces perform duties comparable to those of non-indigenous forces, but they aren't always recognized as essential services. This lack of recognition has a direct impact on funding, stability, staff retention and the ability to provide culturally safe services.

In early 2025, the former prime minister of Canada committed to supporting jurisdiction in priority areas, including policing. Therefore, the AFNQL recommends that the Government of Canada, in collaboration with first nations, introduce a bill to confirm the right of first nations to establish their own culturally appropriate police services and officially recognize these indigenous police forces as essential services.

[English]

Funding for first nations police services under tripartite agreements remains lower than for non-indigenous services, despite their having equivalent responsibilities. Although progress has been made in equipment and infrastructure, staffing levels remain inadequate, compromising 24-7 coverage.

In Quebec, the per-officer costs for the Sûreté du Québec have increased more in comparison to the funding for indigenous police services. When investments are compared, the gap not only persists but continues to expand, despite the Canadian Human Rights Tribunal decision of 2022.

The cost of training for an indigenous candidate is exponentially higher than it is for a non-indigenous candidate. For example, a community in Quebec recently spent \$25,000 to train four candidates in the use of tasers. Additionally, police services operating in remote regions face high operational costs and significant logistical challenges. These realities must be taken into account in funding models that are adapted to actual conditions.

The AFNQL thus demands that Public Safety Canada undertake a comprehensive revision of the first nations and Inuit policing program to ensure that funding levels reflect the principle of substantive equality. This includes covering the full costs associated with training, skills development and operations in remote communities to ensure recruitment and retention.

[Translation]

Access to police training for first nations police forces in Quebec is hampered by two major factors.

In terms of language, the École nationale de police du Québec and Quebec's Ministère de la Sécurité publique do not give priority to English-language training, which excludes a number of candidates from English-speaking communities. Even training offered elsewhere, such as by the Royal Canadian Mounted Police in Saskatoon, is impeded by Quebec's regulatory requirements.

Administratively, bureaucratic constraints also lead to significantly lengthy and costly processes. When a police force applies for federal funding for training, it must comply with Quebec's Act respecting the Ministère du Conseil exécutif. As a result, the AFNQL recommends that Public Safety Canada work upstream with Quebec's Ministère de la Sécurité publique to develop bilingual training in partnership with institutions outside Quebec, while ensuring provincial recognition.

[English]

Ever since the creation of the first nations and Inuit policing program in 1991, the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, the MMIWG, the Auditor General of Canada in 2014 and 2024, the Public Safety Canada engagement results and the recent Supreme Court decisions have time and time again said the same thing: It is time for the federal government to recognize the status and role of first nations policing, facilitate access to adapted training, correct funding inequities based on the principle of substantive equality and transform indigenous policing from "its current state [of] mere delegation to an exercise in self-governance and self-determination".

*Tshinashkumitinau. Meegwetch.*

• (1700)

**The Chair:** Now we're going to our question-and-answer round for six minutes.

MP Zimmer, go ahead, please.

**Bob Zimmer (Prince George—Peace River—Northern Rockies, CPC):** Thank you. It's good to see you again, Chief Woodhouse. How are your mom and dad doing?

**National Chief Cindy Woodhouse Nepinak:** My mom and dad are just fine and dandy. They're aging well.

**Bob Zimmer:** They're keeping busy. I met them last year and it was sure nice to meet them.

I have a more specific question around Inuit and first nations policing. I'm going to ask you about using an already-stressed RCMP resource for what your members have already identified is not the problem.

What I have before me is a document. I pointed it out to you before we started today. It's the "Special Chiefs Assembly", from December 6, 7 and 8, 2022, in Ottawa. The resolution is number 39/2022. It specifically refers to Bill C-21 and firearms. I'm just going to quote a few statements that it makes. This is from page two:

Bill C-21 notably does not address the illegal sale of handguns, but instead attempts to further restrict the legal sale and ownership of handguns, creating "red flag" and "yellow flag" laws enabling suspension of firearms license, and allowing police to obtain a court order for a warrantless search and seizure with no provision for a targeted person to defend themselves.

Next, clause E says:

On November 24, 2022, the House of Commons Standing Committee on Public Safety and National Security met to do a "clause by clause" reading of Bill C-21, and shortly after amendments were introduced adding long guns (rifles) to the banned list, potentially criminalizing many of the types of firearms currently used by First Nations people for sustenance hunting.

I will add in that it was namely the widely used SKS.

This is the resolution at the bottom of page 2:

Therefore be it resolved that the First Nations-in-Assembly:

1. Publicly oppose Bill C-21, An act to amend certain Acts and to make certain consequential amendments (firearms), which potentially criminalizes long guns (rifles) used by First Nation peoples in exercising their Aboriginal and Treaty rights to sustenance hunt and harvest.

Chief, do you as an organization still oppose Bill C-21 and the resulting firearm confiscation program, yes or no?

**National Chief Cindy Woodhouse Nepinak:** Absolutely. We follow our chiefs in assembly, and we follow our first nations in assembly. Whatever this says, that stands until it's otherwise said so by the assembly.

**Bob Zimmer:** Thank you, Chief.

We're here today talking about first nations and Inuit policing. We heard at our last committee hearing, as we've heard even from previous witnesses today—we heard from the Auditor General—that first nations and Inuit RCMP detachments are short-staffed and under-resourced. There's a lack of recruiting. It's been well known and it's very challenging for remote communities, as you just mentioned. I've travelled extensively in Yukon, Northwest Territories and Nunavut, and I've seen that first-hand.

We've heard, even today, stories about how real criminals aren't being held in custody and are being released even before their paperwork is completed.

Considering that RCMP management in Ottawa can't ensure that first nations and Inuit basic policing needs are met, do you think it's a good use of manpower and resources to go after law-abiding first nations and Inuit firearms owners when they clearly are not the problem?

**National Chief Cindy Woodhouse Nepinak:** Absolutely not. I think you're right. As I said in my statement, on reserve, we're so underpoliced. Sometimes there are first nations calling me, asking to get policing services into their communities—this is like on Saturdays. It's tough. I feel for these communities that have to constantly beg to get policing services into their communities. We have to do a better job in this country. It's been far too long.

I don't know if Julie has anything further to add to that, but there's a lot of work that we have to do. I'm glad that we're finally

talking about this around this table. It should have happened a long time ago, because it's getting worse. I just feel like we don't have the resources on first nation communities compared to what they have in towns or cities.

First nations are always overlooked and pushed down. We're doing the best we can. With whatever resources we do have, we put that towards first nation communities. Let's have those discussions with first nations directly on how they would like to have policing services. It's disheartening when there are 36 police forces to date. It used to be more than that, and then there was a decline. Now, it's just staying there.

We see from the data that for community-based services with our first nation policing services, they're not trigger happy. They don't kill our people. They're there trying to be grounded in the community. I think we need to support first nation police forces.

Thank you.

• (1705)

**The Chair:** Jamie, you have 30 seconds.

**Jamie Schmale:** Thank you, Chair.

On that comment, you just mentioned not having the resources. How does that compound the fact that in testimony we just heard in the previous meeting there is a revolving-door justice system? People are getting out on bail, committing a crime, getting out on bail, committing a crime, getting out on bail and committing a crime. Chief Abram spoke about that.

Do you have something more to add on that?

**The Chair:** Please provide a short answer.

**National Chief Cindy Woodhouse Nepinak:** I'll let Julie answer.

**Julie McGregor (Chief of Staff, Assembly of First Nations):** If you look at the justice system as a whole and the starting place in terms of community-centred policing, first nations servicing their own communities with their own police forces is a way of deterring situations where offenders are going through the whole process, getting out on bail, reoffending and so forth.

There is an ability for our own community members to understand issues like mental health, addictions and so forth. There's an understanding there in terms of the connecting factors, whether they be residential school experiences or other issues. The policing is very different. It's more community-centred, so there's an ability for offenders to be recommended to go to treatment. There's more input from police officers when it's time for bail hearings.

We understand our people better than anybody else. If we look at it as a whole experience, policing that's community-based creates less of an issue with bail and people committing offences.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

We'll go to MP Philip Earle, and you'll probably be able to expand on that throughout the questioning.

**Philip Earle (Labrador, Lib.):** Thank you.

Thank you all for appearing here today.

I'm the member of Parliament for Labrador, which has 30 communities with populations in which some or all are indigenous. Today I'm going to focus a little on the communities in northern Labrador, particularly those that are under the Nunatsiavut Government, which is self-government; the community of Natuashish, which is an Innu community; and that of Sheshatshiu.

I listened to my colleagues talk a lot about the gang violence and gun violence that we're seeing in communities across Canada. Fortunately to now, in the communities in Labrador, we're not seeing that level of gun violence—thankfully. If I were to ask a national chief for some advice on how we make sure that we never see that gun violence, what advice would you be giving me?

**Chief Francis Verreault-Paul:** The main point here is to legislate first on policing services and to recognize the services as essential services. It should not only be in terms of funding but as self-determination for first nations as well. I think this is extremely important.

We need to encourage the communities to have their own police, indigenous policing. I think this is extremely important, and we are aware of all of the reasons for it.

We heard Regional Chief Benedict talk earlier about that trust relationship. That is so important to build between the police force and members of the communities. When you have that indigenous policing in place, I think it reflects that relationship. It is extremely important.

Obviously, the other part of it is to give the resources needed to communities to make sure they are safe. I want to give an example of when we talk about being understaffed. Some of the communities have their own police, indigenous policing, but I was talking with a friend last week about this. He's on a 24-hour shift. He needs to patrol for eight hours and for the other 16 hours he's on call by himself. Yes, they have indigenous policing, but at the same time, they are very understaffed.

I think those are the two main points for keeping communities safe.

• (1710)

**National Chief Cindy Woodhouse Nepinak:** I'll also say that it needs a whole-of-government approach. I get that this is one program, but at the same time, we have to make sure we look at housing in first nation communities. We have a \$350-billion infrastructure gap right across this country. That's huge, especially for first nations children on reserve.

I heard a stat today that only 39% of our kids on first nation communities have access to high-speed Internet. What other community

would have that? You hear of one community that had things happen a couple of months ago. They couldn't even get Wi-Fi or a cell-phone working. These are the realities that first nations face on the ground.

We need to have a whole-of-government approach as well. I get it. Start investing in first nations policing right away, immediately. That should be the goal of today. Also, each and every one of you should make sure that we're working on housing for first nations people. Most important is education. The more we invest in education and good, proper schools for our kids, the more we're going to help our young people to be stronger in this country.

I also have to say, when we have federal-provincial-territorial meetings.... There was a health meeting on Friday, and first nations were not even invited to it. Usually they invite us for only a couple of hours. I feel bad for previous national chiefs who have been treated like this. Then they kick us out, and they talk about real issues in the federal-provincial-territorial meetings, for instance, on health or housing. We're always kind of kicked out.

I want to thank the premiers who committed to a first ministers meeting on first nations issues. We look to this House to make sure that commitment happens and that we work together towards that.

I always want to say this about people like Mandy Gull-Masty. I feel for her, because every other minister or deputy minister, every sector, whether it's transportation, justice or policing, has an FPT table, except Indian affairs. Nobody ever wants to talk about first nations on the ground. We always get left out, including in big investments that come out on something like the \$13-billion housing announcement that was made by the housing minister just a few weeks ago on the Building Canada Act. There's not even a carve-out for first nations.

Again, we see this here. Let's avoid that. Let's work together and make sure that first nations people are included in decisions in this country.

Thank you.

**Philip Earle:** In a previous set, we heard about wraparound services and the importance of them. The witness from the SQ talked about that.

In the 20 seconds you have left, talk to me about the importance of the wraparound services combined with policing.

Thank you. *Tshinashkumitin.*

**Julie McGregor:** It's extremely important. The National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls spent a lot of time talking about how there needs to be wraparound services not just for families of those who go missing and murdered, but also for the supporting communities that are trying to heal in terms of long-standing issues within our communities brought on by a number of factors.

It's necessary for both the victims and the offenders. We're all trying to heal together to make healthier communities. It's so important within the context of overrepresentation as well to deal with recidivism and to deal with issues like child welfare, which was brought up.

Child welfare for most first nations individuals is always called the gateway to our prison system. We need to start at a very young age and have those wraparound support services, whether it be housing, mental health, addictions or even employment and so forth, to lift up our people and ensure they're not transferring over from the child welfare system to the prison system.

• (1715)

**The Chair:** Thank you very much.

[Translation]

Mr. Lemire, you have the floor for six minutes.

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

Thank you to the witnesses for being here.

Ms. Woodhouse Nepinak, if you make an appointment this evening to watch the baseball game, or the Canadiens game, which we mustn't forget, I'll be happy to make myself available. You seem to bring good luck. I'm sure many of my colleagues may be with you.

You began your remarks by being very critical of Ottawa's inaction and the fact that you've been on standby for a long time. You barely veiled an invitation to our committee to take this study very seriously and therefore to make strong recommendations. What recommendations should our committee make?

[English]

**Julie McGregor:** Thank you, Vice-Chair, for the question.

This issue has been studied several times in this committee and also in the Senate committees, and we've been saying the same thing from the start. First nations police services, the FNIPP, the first nations policing program, can't be a program. It can't be left up to the government. There can't be discretionary funding. It needs to be legislated as an essential service like all other non-first nation police services are.

There needs to be that stability in funding but also in terms of growth within the first nations police services. There are 36 and there have been 36 for a very long time. There are more and more first nations that are prepared to take on their own police services and just need the ability to do that, to have the go-ahead, to have the essential services legislation, obviously.

Also, first nations police services need to be accountable to communities. First nations need to feel that they have input in terms of

how their communities are being policed and make sure it meets their cultural needs, their cultural standards and their community needs.

Like the regional chief said, you currently have officers who are in remote areas policing by themselves with poor infrastructure, poor equipment and poor training. They're left alone to police large tracts of land. That's very dangerous. There should be some standards developed by first nations for their policing services and, of course, for adequate funding.

We're always talking about funding. There are 36 stand-alone first nations police services across Canada, and 32 of them are fighting the government right now in court just for equitable funding. You can look at the Auditor General's report from 2024. There was \$13 million unaccounted for. They weren't sure where \$45 million of it would be spent, under FNIPP for the 2023-24 fiscal year.

Our communities need the funding. They need the ability to develop their own police services, and the police services themselves need to be essential services. Those are always going to be our recommendations.

[Translation]

**Sébastien Lemire:** Thank you, *meegwetch*.

National Chief Verreault-Paul, I also want to ask you this, because you began by mentioning how important it is that indigenous policing be recognized as an essential service. Obviously, that's certainly rooted in the concept of funding. The resources have to be available beyond the concept of programs, which, as Ms. McGregor just said, is significantly limited, particularly in terms of fields of application or bureaucracy.

Are you recommending that the committee recognize indigenous services as essential services?

**Chief Francis Verreault-Paul:** Absolutely. I think that's the most important aspect here. We also have to agree on the definition of an essential service. We had this discussion when I was chief of staff to the former chief of the Assembly of First Nations Quebec-Labrador, Ghislain Picard. We've discussed this over the past year. In the definition of what constitutes an essential service, there's an aspect the government got stuck on, that of provincial and territorial jurisdictions, the role of the Government of Canada and the role of first nations governments. This is extremely important. So there's funding, yes, but there's also self-determination. It's extremely important that future legislation be able to recognize this aspect. That's our hope.

The other aspect we strongly recommend is that the future legislation be drafted in co-development. I didn't mention it earlier, but it's extremely important that the legislation be drafted in co-development with first nations. In recent years, there have been a number of recommendations, several reports and several consultations, and last year, there were national consultations.

I think the solutions are on the table and that now it's important to carry them forward into legislation.

**Sébastien Lemire:** I invite you to submit that reflection to us, as well as the definition of an essential service, so that the committee can adopt it. At the very least, we should make sure that it can be debated here as well.

One of the problems is a lack of resources. Could you tell us what the effects of this lack of resources are? Earlier, you said that only 22 communities in Quebec have indigenous police services. Why is it not a priority to have them in 100% of the communities?

[English]

**The Chair:** Unfortunately, that's all the time we have, but perhaps it will come out as we ask questions.

MP Morin, you have five minutes.

**Billy Morin:** Thank you, Chiefs, for coming.

Of course, we can't be great leaders without support staff, so thank you, Julie McGregor.

I thank you guys for highlighting what we've all known for years—even the last panel said this—which is that the real solutions to policing lie in the communities themselves.

It's a huge country, with 600-plus first nations. A lot of them do policing, security and family differently, but there is a holistic uniqueness to what they have in common, which is underfunding, being undersupported and a lack of political will and jurisdictional recognition from the government when it comes to policing. After the 2022 mass killings at James Smith Cree Nation, the prime minister at the time promised to make indigenous policing a police service.

I'll build upon my Bloc colleague's last question, which wasn't answered. Perhaps the national chief or the regional chief can answer this.

It's been three years. Can you expand on the real consequences of not keeping that promise and the commitment from the current government, and of not making this essential? There is still a high rate of crime, a high rate of victimhood in our communities and a higher rate of people bringing drugs into our communities.

This commitment was made three years ago. Can you talk about the effects of that commitment not being fulfilled?

**National Chief Cindy Woodhouse Nepinak:** I'll start and the regional chief will follow up after.

Absolutely, there are real consequences. We've seen time and time again, every week, unfortunately—every single week, if not every day—that there are consequences right across the country to not investing in first nations policing in first nation communities. Time is so important, and we need to get results. As King Charles said when he came here.... What was his thing on deeds? We need more deeds in this country, rather than just talking.

I challenge this country to get back to the table with us. As the regional chief stated—and I echo him—the work has been done. Chiefs have been across the country and first nations have been across the country, putting solutions on the table. Our communities will come to you with what they wish for, but we need to have those discussions and a real political willingness to change things. I

hope that we have it and that if we do come up with something, we all come together in a good way to make sure that it moves forward in a good way.

I look to this committee to be those leaders and those drivers to make that change and make sure that first nations are getting the support they need right on the ground.

Regional Chief, go ahead.

• (1720)

**Chief Francis Verreault-Paul:** I'll quickly add the political aspect of it. As it was mentioned by Julie, we're all in litigation because of it. This is one aspect of the consequences.

Since I got elected, I've been talking about an aspect.... We've all been talking about reconciliation. I like the importance of legislative reconciliation. This is a tremendous opportunity for the federal government to put that in place with a law on indigenous policing. I want to flag that, as well, as a consequence.

**Julie McGregor:** If I can make one quick comment, because we do have the indigenous chiefs of police services with us, the practical aspects of that are the burnout and the issues with our first nations police services, the fact that we have high turnover rates. A lot of first nations police services are poached by the RCMP, the SQ or the OPP because they're well-trained. They're good police services, but they're not paid right and they're not compensated right. There's often a very limited future for them, so there's a lot of burnout and turnover. We're really training first nations officers to work for non-first nations police services.

Thank you.

**Billy Morin:** I hear you, Chiefs, when you say that the bottom line is that we know the solutions. It's frustrating too to have 32 litigations going on out of 36 across the country. Again, we hear talking points from the government about how they know what the answer is. We wouldn't have litigation if they just enforced the answer that they keep saying they know. Instead, we've been hearing about \$13 million spent on officers who never came to the communities. When it comes to these issues, it's extremely frustrating to hear.

This is a more holistic thing too when it comes to justice reform and justice in the communities. We see communities, like the Kainai two weeks ago, doing their own justice system. The Yukon first nations are doing their own justice system. The Senate has advanced legislation allowing indigenous police to enforce indigenous laws and indigenous prosecutors to handle those cases, in Bill S-223 and Bill S-224. Sometimes in our communities, tough love is still love. We have a banishment bylaw that the RCMP enforces for us.

I'm wondering if you can speak, National Chief, on the importance of recognizing first nation laws and justice systems as well.

**The Chair:** I'm sorry, but that's all the time we have.

It is MP Lavack who is up next.

[Translation]

**Ginette Lavack:** Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

[English]

Thank you so much for being here today, for your testimony and for all the information you're sharing.

I'll get right to the heart of it. Accountability and trust, as we know, are at the heart of community safety. From your perspective, how can indigenous police services maintain that accountability to their communities within the broader framework of working with federal and provincial systems?

**Julie McGregor:** Indigenous police services themselves are accountable to the communities, with the way it currently is. If it was better funded, there would be better governance and oversight, but there isn't right now. It's an underfunded program. Nevertheless, the accountability is the fact these are our own community members who are serving us and who are also accountable to us. There is that built-in system of accountability. Definitely, in terms of looking at legislation, if it was legislated as an essential service, there would be legislative standards with respect to governance included in there as well.

**Ginette Lavack:** Can you also expand a bit on the recruitment and retention piece you mentioned earlier? What can the federal and provincial governments that are supporting this do to help the situation with regard to recruitment and retention?

• (1725)

**Julie McGregor:** I can only say it so many times: fund equitably. Currently, the funding model is that the federal government goes to the province and says, "Hey, what's your 48%? We'll throw in our 52%." The province decides it's  $x$  amount for so many officers. It's probably under what's needed, but that's what they're going to put in, so the feds come in and say that they'll do their 52%. There are constant situations where, as the regional chief said, first nations are putting in money for infrastructure, for equipment, for training and all of that.

**Chief Francis Verreault-Paul:** Can I add one element?

[Translation]

**Ginette Lavack:** Yes.

[English]

**Chief Francis Verreault-Paul:** It's specific to our region about training. I really want to highlight this. I think I mentioned it in my speech.

In Quebec, there's that specificity about languages. I'll put it that way. In close to half of the communities, the working language is English, and in the other half it's French. Due to the systemic barrier—I'll say it that way as well—of the languages, the training for the English working communities is really tough. I mentioned those systemic barriers with Quebec, and I think they have an important responsibility to play in this as well.

[Translation]

**Ginette Lavack:** Chief Verreault-Paul, Quebec has entered into very specific agreements with a number of indigenous police forces. What are the lessons learned from those partnerships that should inform future federal legislation on indigenous policing?

**Chief Francis Verreault-Paul:** One solution would be to have the federal government, the provincial government and the first nations governments at the same table to work on a tripartite partnership. Even though we're here to discuss the federal government's role, the fact remains that the provincial and territorial governments also have an extremely important role to play in implementing self-determination for first nations by encouraging them and not getting in their way. I invite all of us to work together to that end, including, of course, the federal government.

**Ginette Lavack:** Thank you very much.

**The Chair:** Mr. Lemire, you have the floor for two and a half minutes.

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

Chief Verreault-Paul, Quebec has made some progress thanks to the Viens commission. However, many of the recommendations in the commission's final report depend on federal government funding. What has the federal government done since that report was tabled?

In addition, what should be done to ensure policing? Should that be done through legislation rather than the program we talked about earlier? According to the Auditor General's figures, \$48 million from that program's funds have not been spent. What are we waiting for to bring the parties together at that table you've been talking about for some time?

**Chief Francis Verreault-Paul:** I can only speak from the first nations' perspective. As I said to Ms. Lavack, we're ready to sit at that table to do that work. It's extremely important to re-establish the tripartite committee between the provincial government, Canada and the first nations governments. The first nations have bilateral relationships with the federal and provincial governments, and the federal government has a bilateral relationship with the provincial government, but all too often, the three governments aren't at the same table. Building a trilateral relationship is an important issue. Parties have to be together at the same time. I hope the committee will recommend this.

At the risk of repeating myself, the first thing to aim for is a bill, co-developed with the first nations, to recognize first nations policing as an essential service. It's also important to take a holistic view of the matter. For example, as we said earlier, the importance of educating and training future police officers has to be taken into account in their recruitment and retention. One of the key elements in retention is to provide enough resources, because police officers who are alone or who have too little assistance are at risk of suffering from burnout after several years. In short, there are many aspects to consider.

• (1730)

**Sébastien Lemire:** You're no doubt aware that there was a regional indigenous police project in Abitibi-Témiscamingue. I don't know if that project still exists or if there have been formal meetings to implement it. On the federal side, I'm still waiting to hear about that project.

Thank you so much for being here. I wish I had many more hours, but I'm out of time.

**The Chair:** Thank you very much.

[*English*]

Thank you to our presenters. That was very helpful to the study.

Thanks to the committee.

Cindy, thank you very much for leading the cheer on the Blue Jays. I echo your sentiment. Go, Jays, go!

Brendan.

**Brendan Hanley:** There was a question from my colleague Mr. Morin that was left on the table, as it were. I wonder whether we could ask for a written response to that question.

**The Chair:** Sure. Submit that in writing, please. Thank you.

This meeting is adjourned.

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