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Mr. Dean Allison

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

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● (0805)

[*English*]

The Chair (Mr. Dean Allison (Niagara West—Glanbrook, CPC)): Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2), our study on the federal contribution to reducing poverty in Canada will continue today.

I want to thank all of our witnesses for taking time out of their busy schedules to be here. We started on the east coast in Halifax, Moncton, and Montreal. We're in Toronto today and tomorrow. We're hoping to be on the west coast and in the western part of Canada in the fall. So we want to thank you for taking the time to be here.

We will start with Laurel Rothman from Campaign 2000.

Welcome.

Ms. Laurel Rothman (National Co-ordinator, Campaign 2000): Thanks for the opportunity. *Bonjour.*

I think some of you may know we're a broad coalition of more than 120 organizations. We sometimes say we're one of the few that includes auto workers, psychiatrists, faith communities, low-income people, and many others who see the eradication of poverty as a public interest issue that affects us all.

This morning I want to say a couple of words about the situation, although I know you're all quite well briefed. We're particularly concerned about the persistence of poverty, especially among children and families. From the beginning our key issues have been the eradication of poverty and growing income inequality. As you probably know, the OECD unfortunately singled out Canada as one of the most unequal societies last year in its review, and it cited major tax cuts and reductions in transfers to provinces and individuals as key sources.

I would be remiss if I didn't remind people that one in nine children lives in poverty in this country—that's the most recent statistic, and we expect a more recent one this week from Statistics Canada—and that's two decades after the House of Commons unanimously committed to end child poverty by 2000.

We strongly believe that eradicating poverty is an all-party issue, a non-partisan issue, so we're looking for strong leadership at the federal level with clear vision, bold action, dedicated resources, and a long-range commitment. We know this will not go away in a short time. The situation is quite complex.

Most people are familiar with the demographic issues, the human rights issues, and the moral issues of why we need to eradicate poverty, but I'd like to say a couple of words about the economic rationale. There is strong evidence—and I know you'll hear this later from other presenters—that poverty leads to sickness and ill health. A number of economists for the Ontario Association of Food Banks recently did a study of income, health care usage, and health costs, and showed that if we brought the lowest 20% of our population up in income to the level of the next 20%—what we might call modest income—we would save $7.6 billion a year in health care expenditures. That is the most concrete way of saying it that I've ever seen.

The costs to the justice system—including direct expenditures on police, courts, legal aid, and victims' costs—are very high and estimated at between $22 billion and $48 billion. It's also estimated that the strongest predictor—some of my colleagues may know better than I—of being involved in criminal activity is literacy. Poverty is key, but so is literacy. So if we increased the literacy rates of the bottom 20% to those of the next 20%, it's estimated that we'd save $1 billion to $2 billion. Those are some thoughtful cost-benefit analyses we could look at.

I think we all know that as the global recession has taken hold, unemployment has gone up. As job opportunities disappear, many of the supports that still exist—and many have been eroded and are not there—are strained, and low-income people are often driven further into poverty. The person on social assistance who might have been ready to take a part-time job at the local retail outlet is often not finding that job. That's what we're hearing on the ground in this area.

● (0810)

We're urging you to adopt a comprehensive poverty reduction strategy with targets, timelines, dedicated human resources, accountability through public reporting, at least, and consultation, but we would also suggest that there are things that can be done in the first year of a commitment and that need not wait for a full consultation.

In coordination with first nations and aboriginal communities, we also urge that appropriate targets, timelines, and indicators be developed. There's no question that with one in four children in first nations communities living in poverty, and with many of the other situations, there are additional specific and I think historic issues that figure into the strategy to end child and family poverty in first nations communities.

I can't resist adding that we don't have to wait to make sure we have proper elementary schools in first nations communities. Some of us were at the Calgary social forum last week and heard Cindy Blackstock, from the First Nations Child and Family Caring Society, give an extremely detailed and moving presentation. There's just no question: we must have our elementary kids in first nations communities in proper schools.

Let me go on to say a couple of things about what we recommend in a poverty reduction strategy. There are four key principles. First is sustaining employment. You may be surprised to hear us say that. What we should say is that four out of ten children in this country who live in poverty have at least one parent who does work full time throughout the year. They might not work at the same job, but they're working, so always relying on the labour market only will not do it.

We need an assurance that any parent or adult working full time, and I believe that's 1,500 hours a year according to HRSDC and Statistics Canada.... That's only 30 to 32 hours a week. I shouldn't say “only”, as that's 30 to 32 hours a week, some of which is hard to get these days. We need an assurance that this person working full time can live out of poverty. We're arguing that we need the labour market salary at a living wage of at least $10 an hour and we need a $5,200 child benefit, because of course, as you know, labour markets don't distinguish between individuals who live on their own and individuals who support families.

So we need to raise the living wage and we need to support and recognize the cost of raising children. As part of that, I think, we're recommending that we have to also look carefully at what we're already spending, which includes a reconciliation of what's called the universal child care benefit but really is a flat income transfer to families with children under six.

Let me just say one more thing. The national child benefit has a good track record. Over 10 years, it has been increased to what is now a maximum of $3,271, I believe. There have been problems, certainly, with some of the lowest-income families, those on social assistance, not benefiting as greatly, but those problems are being worked out. Let us remind you from HRSDC's own evaluation that the NCB prevented 59,000 families with 125 children from living in poverty. This evaluation was done in 2004. That's a 12% decrease.

We did a simulation in 2007 about what it would look like to raise the child benefit up to, at that time, $5,100, but we're adjusting our numbers for the cost of living. Our simulation estimates that it would reduce child and family poverty by 31%. It would probably bring it down to single digits, which is what UNICEF has challenged Canada and other wealthy nations to do.

In addition to the income side, there's no question that we have to look at what we're calling essential resources: available, affordable, high-quality early childhood education and care services, and of course affordable housing. I'm sure you'll hear much about that from many of the panellists.

I want to add one other key strategy that we feel is needed in southern Ontario in particular, I would suggest: we need a strong equity plan. We need to know that there will be equitable outcomes for children, families, and individuals from racialized backgrounds.

● (0815)

We just took a look at the census data, and there is no question. We all know our patterns of immigration have changed. We also know, as my colleagues in the community reminded us, that many of our colleagues and neighbours from racialized communities, colleagues and neighbours who were born and raised in Canada, are not succeeding as many of them hope and want to do, so we need that additional strategy as part of the consideration.

What I will say in closing, and I hope we'll have time to talk later, is that we certainly will.... I omitted one important thing: the other thing we absolutely must do in the short term is reform employment insurance.

I did a little bit of work. It is interesting that in its previous incarnation, before 2002, EI was indeed estimated to have a poverty reduction dimension to it, particularly for families. We are beginning to see and hear in Oshawa, where workers from the auto parts sector in particular live, and in lots of other areas where lots of workers live, that some families have no choice but to turn to welfare, or else expect that if they don't get a job in six months, they will have to do that. There are a whole series of issues that make that complicated.

I think reforming employment insurance is really poverty prevention, and that needs to be a significant issue and an immediate issue.

We are looking for a comprehensive multi-year commitment, but there is also an expectation that in the beginning, even if you aren't able to adopt a comprehensive strategy, you could reform EI, raise the child benefit, and get started on early childhood education and care services. The federal government, we would suggest, has an important convening role there, and a similar one with affordable housing.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Rothman.

We're now going to move to Patricia Smiley, who is with the South Etobicoke Social Reform Committee.

Welcome, Patricia. The floor is yours. You have five minutes.

Mrs. Patricia Smiley (Member, South Etobicoke Social Reform Committee): Thank you.

I'm hearing impaired. Can people hear me? Good.

First of all, thank you for having me here. I'm very pleased to be here.

The South Etobicoke Social Reform Committee is a group of people who live or work in the Etobicoke-Lakeshore area. There are people who represent LAMP Community Health Centre as service providers in various ways. South Etobicoke Community Legal Services is represented, as well as Toronto Public Health. There are other people on the committee who have lived in poverty, have experienced poverty, and volunteer their time to actively advocate on behalf of people living in circumstances of poverty and for its eradication. We have belonged to the 25 in 5 Network for Poverty Reduction, which is working with the provincial government to establish some plans for poverty reduction.

In our own community, we have organized, for instance, a speak-out in the last provincial election for people in poverty to speak out on their issues. We've organized forums on a variety of issues, including raising the minimum wage, things like bedbugs, things that affect lower-income people or the issues that lower-income people have to deal with.

That is who and what we are and what we do.

We've established six major planks for what we feel is the federal role in poverty reduction. The first is housing. We would like to see permanent funding and increases for the homelessness prevention initiative and the residential rehabilitation assistance program. We think these should be permanent. They are good, effective programs.

Second, we'd also like to see some increase in funding to deal with our local issues. We'd like to have increased funding for local initiatives in building and maintaining housing that is not only affordable but is supportive for those people who need it: seniors, people who are disabled, etc.

Third, like everyone else, we seriously need reform of employment insurance. We've seen quite a bit of deep and persistent poverty in our community over the years, long before this current economic recession began, and we feel that the fact that somewhere between 20% and 25% of the members of our communities are eligible for employment insurance is a chief cause of poverty. That is for a variety reasons. One of the major ones is the reality of the current labour market. Most jobs that are available fall into the category of precarious employment. They are part time. They are unstable. They are insecure. They are through temporary agencies. People are self-employed, etc. That is the kind of employment that is available to people when they lose jobs.

Certainly there is a lot of industry in the South Etobicoke area. We've been gradually losing the industrial base since the middle of the 1980s. I'm not exactly sure of the numbers, but one of the most recent things to happen was that 450 jobs were lost in a plant in Long Branch that made the best spark plugs in the world, apparently. They decided to move to Mexico because it was cheaper. These were well-paid, unionized, stable, secure jobs, and interestingly enough, most of those workers lived in the community as well.

● (0820)

We also believe there should be the creation of a national child care plan. We saw this looming before the election in 2003. We would very much like that back. We don't think that either the national child benefit supplement or the universal child care benefit is making up the difference for, as we say, a national, accessible child care plan for everyone at any income level. This is good for children for all kinds of reasons, which Laurel Rothman has already set out. Furthermore, it provides parents with the ability to get out and work as they need.

Also, it is very important that we ensure access to post-secondary education and training for all Canadians. This is for the immigrants and refugees in our neighbourhood. There are a number of them—new Canadians. A large proportion of our community is new Canadians. It's for youth who don't have parents who are able to put them through post-secondary education. It's for people in mid-life, mid-career who need upgrading, who want to make transitions for whatever reason. People should not be prevented from accessing those opportunities, whether they are on social assistance, employment insurance, etc.

Lastly, it is very important that there be funding strategies for public transit within and between the municipalities. The TTC is mostly supported by the residents of Toronto. It has become hugely expensive, and it is a huge expense in the lives of lower-income people, whether they are working or on social assistance. It is $2.25 a trip. It's an enormous proportion of people's incomes, and it is a necessity. We need to be able to get around for daily reasons, to get to work. Young people need to get to school, particularly high school students. You need it to go buy your groceries, to get to your medical appointments, etc. This is a fairly spread-out suburban neighbourhood. We know of people who can't afford to get around as much as they would like, just to take part in social and community life.

These are the major issues that we feel the federal government should be promoting.

I want to go back to housing a little bit. I know I'm going over my time here, but we feel the model of these programs, where the federal government is giving money to the municipalities to distribute among community agencies, is a very good and effective model for a funding process. This really works because people in those community-based agencies know the needs. The municipalities, even a large municipality like Toronto, know the community service sector. They know where things are good. That really works. It's very local; it's very community-based. This is both cost effective and effective in terms of the results that are brought about in those kinds of programs.

I'm going to end here. I just want to say that overall we need to establish timelines, targets, and methods of evaluation. This does require cooperation by all orders of government.

● (0825)

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Smiley.

We're now going to move to Daniel Cullen, from the Brampton Neighbourhood Resource Centre.

Daniel, welcome, sir. You have five minutes.

Mr. Daniel Cullen (Coordinator, Brampton Neighbourhood Resource Centre): Thank you.

My name is Daniel. I am really honoured and excited to say that my boss, Dr. Hutchinson, asked that I come and speak here. I'm not a professional in any way, and I have no degrees of any kind, but I have a perspective that's mine, and I'm going to give it to you for free, sort of.

Let me start with this. I'm going to give you some answers to the questions, which I read over several times, but I want you to remember a perspective more than anything else, because I'm a voice.

> I'll tell you of a place that exists in many cities.
> It may change in location and size, but these places really exist.
> Most people turn their eyes and try to ignore this place.
> What is this place?
> It is the place of the homeless.
> Who am I to say that most people try to turn their eyes?
> My name is Nobody.
> I heard a mother say, in response to her child's inquiry, “Mommy, who is that man?”
> “Nobody, dear. He's a homeless man.

That's a poem I wrote from experience. From 1978 to 2003, I was a homeless man on over 70 different streets in a wonderful country we call Canada. So I'm quite well aware of poverty at a level that most people aren't.

Poverty exists on many levels. Dr. Hutchinson saw me. He was a man himself who came up from a homeless perspective. He spent some time back in the 1980s on the streets living under a bridge.

I've been advocating for nine years, since I determined that I wasn't going to be homeless any more and that I was going to make a difference about the image of homelessness and poverty in Canada. From that point of view, I've been working for nine years for this very day right here. Along the way, I rallied a meeting, and all the people who needed to be at the table were at the table to talk about the issue of homelessness in the Region of Peel, where I'm dear to. At that point, he saw me there, and that was the first time we really got to know each other. He offered me the position of outreach coordinator for homelessness and anti-poverty initiatives, and that set me on fire.

He sees potential, and that's the whole purpose of what I do. I want to give hope back to a community that in a lot of ways has lost hope. For you guys, the question was to precisely put your point of view, and this is my concise point of view. You need to ask three questions. The first question is, are you receiving adequate food? The second question is, are you receiving adequate shelter. And the third question is, are you receiving adequate clothing. With those three questions in mind, you're going to ask another question: has it been getting better or has it been getting worse? You can base those three questions on the economic, social, and cultural rights and freedoms act, section 11.

Those three questions being asked, what you want to do is form a committee of front-line service providers. I mean front-line service providers—front line—not the funders and not the managers. Managers always have to be in charge, of course, but I'm talking about front-line workers, the ones who are on the beat who deal with poverty on the street. Then you want to get service providers, front-line service providers, and recipients and bring them together. Bring these two communities together in a focus group across Canada. I'm talking about ten provinces and three territories. I'm talking about a focus group, an outcome-oriented focus group.

When those questions are answered and you come to conclusions, there's a format for a focus group that you can use called ORID. I won't go into it, but with that focus group in mind, you take the questions on a national level. You come up with some answers, and then you put some teeth and some legs into what you're doing.

● (0830)

You may think it's just something that I'm dreaming, an idea that can't be done. I'm not a professional. That's why I'm not trying to come at this from a professional point of view. But I'll tell you why I think this can be done, and it's a fact that I'm proud of. They had deemed me for long-term institutionalization with little hope of recovery: “It doesn't look like he'll ever stop being a homeless man.” That's where they left me. And this is where you find me today, standing here with good voice.

I have a little bit of a reputation behind me. I've worked hard to get here. I'm standing here and I've said my piece on what I think needs to be done. The government needs to get a hold on this. Poverty hurts. It hurts a lot. When you say “adequate” this, “adequate” that, we have to remember that we have to get down to where it meets the road. We have to take the people up there, give them some hope, give them some inspiration.

This is a community of people that everybody seems to have forgotten—those in poverty, those on the street, those with mental illness, those in mental housing places, those in jails, those on reserves. When you think of all those places and all those people, including native people, with just a little bit of financial stability from government sources, with moneys coming in on a regular basis, with a focused outcome group, with some teeth on the front lines, I think in six to ten years we could bring poverty down to a very significant level in Canada.

That's not a political point of view, that's mine.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Cullen.

We're now going to move to Ron Berresford, who is here as a reverend.

Sir, the floor is yours for five minutes.

The Reverend Ronald Berresford (Reverend, As an Individual): Thank you, and I'll say amen to that. It's part of my job. Thanks for having me, and thanks for all your hard work and for continuing in this current economic situation. That's a good thing to do.

I'm national director of homeless and prison ministries for the Evangelical Christian Church in Canada. My experience is with people who have been on the streets, in jails, and in hospitals. I have worked with many types of helping agencies for 15 years. Some had rental homes; some used Out of the Cold in winter and parks in summer. Many went through the Barrie Jail or the Penetang superjail. We worked at the Penetang jail when it was first established, and we set up a support system for inmates and former inmates, which resulted in a suicide-free jail for the first five years.

In the country of France, they expect 19 suicides per 10,000 inmates. Penetang has 6,000 to 8,000 inmates per year, so you can do the math. Elimination of suicides can occur with continued human care and contact. Many of these inmates have addictions. Others have mental health problems, and they share characteristics with those living under the poverty line. These limitations are found all over the world. I studied in areas where there has been a great deal of success in poverty reduction. In England, they completed a 10-year plan with local bylaws, sharply reducing street-sleeping. Making resources available according to need, they provided buildings as well as staff to guide individuals. During my time in London, England, I saw a mild nighttime disturbance calmly cleared up before it could escalate, in less than three minutes This was in stark contrast to what was happening seven or eight years earlier.

In Barrie, Ontario, I participated in a local street centre. It had a staff that could direct people living on the streets to find shelter, according to availability and need. They liaised with the Salvation Army, the Women and Children's Shelter, and Out of the Cold. The centre is open during regular office hours and provides a social networking system of staff, who assist people with such things as retrieving lost ID. This is a common problem. I know because they often asked me to sign the form that stated they were who they said they were. That's another of level of upset for people already needy. In the centre they could get help, medical attention. There was a nurse practitioner on staff; there was addiction counselling assistance and family housing.

The country of Finland reduced homelessness by 25% in 2006 over a period of five years. In 2006 Finland participated, along with many other countries in Europe, in the European Union's first conference on housing rights in 2006, which I was invited to attend. I was hopeful and pleased to hear that their goal was to respect the right, protect the right, and fulfill the right to housing for all.

In Ontario, the city of Cambridge has a permanent community-built centre founded by the government and the local community. It has reduced street living for the poor and mentally challenged and increased care for people by networking with established social agencies.

The mechanisms of success in place in Ontario, Europe, and England are not the same, and adjustments to our Canadian organizations need to be made. These changes can be made by those who know how our organizations work and understand the thinking of people who live in poverty. This will further reduce and eliminate poverty and homelessness. Our government and all of us have the key that can end poverty—because we care, because we have the initiative and the imagination, and because we have resources that so many other countries do not have.

● (0835)

As a start, current government funding could be used to establish centres that liaise with at least four other groups: first, hospitals, dentists, and social agencies; second, housing providers; third, community officers and detention centres; and fourth, fundraisers in the communities, and then large cities and small would experience even more success in poverty reduction. With fundraisers brought in during the early stages, such centres could become self-supporting, with perhaps some assistance as required by the specific community and services.

We have some good examples in Ontario cities, Toronto included. It would be a matter of fine tuning them with what is known to work to the particular needs and thinking of the people under the poverty line.

It has been enjoyable to see so many challenged people get the strength they need from staff who understand their needs and have the means to take them to the next step. I enjoy the work I do.

● (0840)

The Chair: Thank you very much, sir.

We're now going to move to Shawn Pegg with Food Banks Canada. Shawn, you have five minutes, sir.

Mr. Shawn Pegg (Manager of Policy and Research, Food Banks Canada): I'd like to thank you for inviting Food Banks Canada here to speak today. I want to commend you for taking the time to hear the views of so many stakeholders. I know you have a long day ahead of you.

I also want to commend you for your visit to Vestiaire St. Joseph Food Bank in Shediac. I believe Mr. Allison and Mr. Martin had the chance to attend. I know that Pat Sirois appreciated your interest. I hope you were able to get some insight into the work she's doing. As someone who lives in Toronto, I know that it's always good to be reminded that poverty and hunger is a problem in rural Canada as well. I forget it too easily.

To introduce my own organization, Food Banks Canada is the national association representing food banks across the country. Our 450 affiliate-member food banks serve 85% of those assisted by food banks. They distribute approximately 130 million pounds of food every year to those in need.

I'm sure some of you have read the headlines about the 20% jump in food bank use this year. The figure comes from the Food Banks Canada HungerCount survey. Although we don't have information from all food banks yet, this puts us on track to see the highest level of food bank use ever in Canada. It's 20% higher than the 700,000 separate individuals served by food banks every month in 2008. I also want to note that the number of people on welfare has jumped dramatically in the past six months.

With that as my introduction, I'd like to talk this morning about what this means for Canadian individuals and families and in a very limited way about what it means for the work you're doing in your current study.

What does it mean to be on welfare? What does it mean to need assistance from a food bank? Very concretely, it means that you've exhausted your other means of supporting yourself and your family. For welfare in particular, just to be eligible you need to have personal assets under a particular level—a very low level, actually.

Just last week, in *The Globe and Mail*, the Premier of British Columbia said:

> Income assistance is clearly the last social safety net into which any worker wants to fall.... [T]hose who are forced to go on welfare risk entering a cycle of dependency....

What this means is that getting people back to self-sufficiency isn't going to happen overnight. Even in the best economic years of the last decade, food bank use didn't drop below 700,000 people per month.

With this in mind, as I was preparing for this morning, I was thinking about other government reports—on poverty reduction, for example, the recent Senate report on rural poverty—and I was thinking about how easily and quickly these kinds of reports are forgotten, to be frank.

So I'd like to quickly say that Food Banks Canada shares the policy preoccupations of many of those who have testified before this committee, including those this morning. We consistently call for a long-term commitment by governments at all levels to investments in affordable—and including, as Patricia said, supportive—housing; quality, accessible, affordable child care; adequate income support policies, among others. We've also called for the inclusion of these and other investments under the rubric of a federal poverty reduction strategy. We think these things are all essential, because the work we do is about people not having enough food, and not having enough food is about not having enough money, so essentially it comes down to people having enough money.

What I'd like to end with and what I want to stress stems from my thinking about, on the one hand, how long it will take for many families to get back on their feet, which will be measured in years for many, and on the other hand, the lifespan of a committee report or even of a given committee membership. I know that membership on this committee has changed since the last election, even though the study has been going on for a couple of sessions.

What I'd like to point to specifically is a simple idea, but I thought it would get ideas rolling: the option of creating a multisectoral body, composed of representatives from various federal government departments, but most crucially from people outside the government who have been and will continue to be essentially concerned with the reduction of hunger and poverty. Though I'm not an expert on this by any means, there are existing examples of this type of structure; for example, the Technical Advisory Committee on Tax Measures for People with Disabilities, which lasted from 2003 to 2005. Another example is the Food Security Reference Group within the First Nations and Inuit Health Branch of Health Canada.

● (0845)

The purpose of the body would be to advise on some or all of the committee's recommendations; to act as a locus for cooperation with provincial and municipal governments, the business community, and the non-profit sector; and to enable knowledge development and knowledge translation with respect to poverty reduction. Its existence will help ensure that what we feel is the extremely important work that this committee is doing will continue for as long as possible after the current study has ended.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Shawn. Just to let you know, there are translation devices here with channels for floor sound and for English and French for those who may need translation. I know that our colleague Mr. Ouellet will probably be asking his questions in French. I'm just letting you know that the devices are there and have those channels.

We're going to start with Ms. Minna.

You have seven minutes.

Hon. Maria Minna (Beaches—East York, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair. Good morning, everyone. Welcome.

It's good to start with you this morning. The first thing I'm going to say is that the list of various indicators, or at least “must do's”, that were listed by Ms. Rothman and Ms. Smiley and so on—with the exception of one or two variations, which of course can be added—are very much the same thing we've heard throughout our hearings so far.

The very first was testimony from the Caledon Institute, who gave us pretty much the same thing, with the exception of WITB, which I think was not mentioned this morning. That's the working income tax benefit. I always get that wrong, but you know which one I mean. Of course, there are a number of other things having to do with the caregiver program, because it affects a lot of people, and so on. Apart from that, the core issues, I think, are pretty much the same and have come up consistently in the majority of testimony. The depth of poverty and the length of poverty in a lot of families tends sometimes to be generational and to continue for some time, and all of these would be things that in my view would break that pattern to some degree.

I want to ask a couple of questions that have to do more with where we go. First of all, my assumption is that we would need to have a national poverty strategy, and I want some of you to let me know as we go—I'm going to ask you a couple of questions—whether that is still something you agree with.

If any of you have looked at what indicators we would put into that national poverty strategy, what would they be? Of those indicators, do some deal with the economic model? Sometimes it's easier—it's an awful thing to say—to sell the need to establish a strategy from the economic perspective as well as the social one.

Some people tend to have this dual brain, thinking that the two things are exclusive, and they're not. We all know that economic and social issues are not exclusive of one another. One feeds into the other. Unfortunately, we still seem to silo the two in policy thinking. Whenever we think we have to address economic crises, we cut services, which of course is not the right thing to do. I'll leave it at that for now.

I have a few more questions, but go ahead. Maybe we can have Ms. Rothman and then Ms. Smiley.

Ms. Laurel Rothman: What I would say about indicators is that we've learned some interesting things. Many of us have worked through the 25 in 5 Network for Poverty Reduction in Ontario. While we have a lot of limitations on data in this country, we have some important existing measures. For example, if one concern about setting targets and timelines is how we would measure change, we have now an established low-income cutoff, an established low-income measure, and an established market basket measure.

If we want to look at primarily the count of who is living in income poverty, I think we could move forward. I'm not sure we would need to wait for a new measure. The U.K. adopted three measures. We could start with one, and if people thought we needed to develop something else, it could be done. That was actually a big discussion in Ontario, we felt from the community side, convincing the minister, who was quite an advocate, that we didn't need to wait for a new deprivation measure. That's one indicator.

The other indicators become more complicated. We could look at how many early childhood education and care spaces we have in relation to the population of children, for example. That might be easier to look at than a more detailed issue of access.

As for affordable housing, I don't know. Perhaps we might look at the same. Those are just a couple of thoughts off the top of my head. We probably should not lose sight of the unemployment rate and the number of people who are working and still living in poverty.

Those are some thoughts.

● (0850)

Mrs. Patricia Smiley: Yes, there have been lots of discussions in the 25 in 5 Network.

One of the things I think is interesting that's happened in Ontario, and I'm very excited by it, is the deprivation index that was developed by Daily Bread Food Bank, because that doesn't assume that once people are living at a subsistence level...it assumes there's a basic, decent standard of living. The people are not only not going to food banks for their food, but when they get to the grocery store, they can afford to buy meat and fresh fruit and vegetables.

Hon. Maria Minna: Developed by the Toronto food bank or for the Canadian—

Mrs. Patricia Smiley: No, it's not. It's Daily Bread Food Bank. This was developed over a long period of time. I was involved in that development.

It's saying that we don't want people living just at a subsistence level. We want people to have a decent lifestyle, and that is what I think is interesting about it. There are some other complex ways. You can establish things like core housing need. How many people are in core housing need? I think those things are common, but I do like the deprivation index. It's a model that's been used in other countries that have had poverty reduction plans.

Hon. Maria Minna: This thing about the deprivation index, maybe we could get a copy of that. We'll follow that up.

Mrs. Patricia Smiley: The current deprivation index has ten things on the index. I'm trying to remember all of them.

Hon. Maria Minna: That's okay. I'm running out of time fast, I think.

The Chair: Do you have that?

Mr. Shawn Pegg: They haven't released the report on the deprivation index yet. I promised to send it to Kevin when it's available.

Hon. Maria Minna: I appreciate that.

I'll come back to some questions if there's a second round. I'm not done yet.

Rev. Ronald Berresford: I have a quick comment on that.

In terms of measuring it, in England, they're at the end of their ten-year program; in fact they were in 2007. They have developed a number of very useful measures and reports that are highly readable. It would be very useful to look at what they've done, but of course we can't implement the system they use there. They count people on the streets, for example, which presents a challenge in Canada, and there are different political things. Of course, they only have two levels of governments and a very small country. It would be very worthwhile to look at how they do it.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

I want to welcome Mr. Ouellet to our committee. *Bonjour*, and thank you for being here. You have the floor, sir, for seven minutes.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Christian Ouellet (Brome—Missisquoi, BQ): Ms. Rothman, you said that literacy was essential in getting people out of poverty. You mentioned 20%.

Were you affected by the recent cuts in literacy programs? Since 2006, the current government has nevertheless reduced aid for literacy.

● (0855)

[*English*]

Ms. Laurel Rothman: First, to answer your question about the impact of funding decisions, I would say yes, I am certainly aware that the cuts have had an impact on community agencies, many of whom rely on volunteers to do the actual—I'll use the word tutoring, for lack of a better word. I'm not sure that's the best word, but working with individuals around literacy. So I would say yes, that's a concern.

I should go back to the statement I made about literacy, because I don't claim to be an expert. What was interesting in the study, which if Kevin doesn't have I'll make sure you have—you probably have it—is that the 20% issue had to do with...if we could improve the literacy rates of the lowest 20% of people in the country, up to the next 20%, it's estimated we'd save between $1 billion and $2 billion in costs, and I would assume that would be over a period of time. But I do think that cuts to literacy are of serious concern to organizations across the country.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Christian Ouellet: Mr. Cullen?

[*English*]

Mr. Daniel Cullen: Thank you.

As far as literacy goes, when you give somebody the ability to write their name, or when you give somebody the ability to pick something up when they understand what they're reading, you empower that person. My job requires me to be out and about in the community on a regular basis, and I'm proud to be out there.

The people are a brilliant bunch of people, but a lot of them don't know how to write their names. A lot of them don't know how to read the paperwork. A lot of them don't know how to do the social work paperwork that needs to be done. When you educate the masses, you empower the masses. I've heard that somewhere before. I've done so much reading, I forget where I read everything.

When you give people the opportunity to have some education, when you give them the opportunity to read for themselves, that leads to the desire to work. That's without a doubt, because...I'm sorry, it's my simple thinking; it's simply the way the mind works.

I should be more politically astute than I am, but if there have been cuts by the government to literacy, it's without a doubt going to affect people. I look at kids I deal with on a regular basis through the community who are hindered because they don't get the education they need. Poverty and literacy and education are mixed up together in one. As I said, it's my perspective, and I'm telling you this from the street.

I'm really excited by what this gentleman was saying. He said he's the national director, and I kind of stepped sideways, and I said "Oh, my goodness, I'm sitting beside a national director". But the point is, he works with the community that I was in. Did you see those people in downtown Toronto, the ones that everybody talks about all the time? You could have seen me there for 25 years, because that's where I was. But because I had the ability to read, because I had the ability to think and reason—because reading has been my saving grace—I had the ability to lift myself up. So is poverty and literacy an important thing? Yes, sir.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Christian Ouellet: Mr. Cullen, is anything being done right now to help the homeless learn to read and write?

[*English*]

Mr. Daniel Cullen: Honestly, yes and no, because the front-line workers have the desire to be there. The programs are in place. They're sitting there. They're waiting to go. But the funding machine is chugging forward and holding back. So although moneys are there, they're there at a trickle. Because they're there at a trickle, we must drive you up the wall, because they come out a little at a time, a little at a time. Do you know what hurts? It is when you give somebody an opportunity, or a hope that they have an opportunity, and then take it away from them; it'll make you sicker than it'll make you healthier.

Thank God that it's being done, but it needs to be done more.

● (0900)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Christian Ouellet: Ms. Smiley, is anything being done in your community to increase adult literacy?

[*English*]

Mrs. Patricia Smiley: Yes, there is a program at LAMP Community Health Centre, but I'm not sure in our community that it's seen as a huge cause of poverty. There's a lot of very well educated, very sophisticated people living in poverty, and I wouldn't associate general educational levels with poverty. There are all kinds of people, as I say, who have a good education. What I think is more important in our community is language training, especially for newcomers. It's a huge problem for newcomer Canadians in making sure that their basic rights are fulfilled. There have been a lot of cutbacks to learning the language of wherever they are living. Language instruction, I think, is the huge issue in our community.

The Chair: Thank you.

Would you like to make a quick comment?

Ms. Laurel Rothman: I want to support what Patricia said. I'm not in any way linking literacy to poverty. The specific I was talking about was literacy and involvement with the justice system, which relates to only a small portion of people who live in poverty—a very important part. But I don't want to equate the two.

The Chair: Thank you.

Go ahead, Ronald.

Rev. Ronald Berresford: The jail in Penetang was run by a private company for the first five years. They had eight teachers in the jail, and it was the most successful program. As I walked around the jail and watched people in classes and courses, some people were sitting with their feet up, and they were there to get out of their cells, etc., but in the classes with the teachers they were working. That was really important. I don't know what's happening now because the government has taken it over—and I make no political comment.

We recommend funding for three years. One of the jobs I end up doing is counselling the front-line workers, because every year you have to put in an application. I suggest you have more people out in the front lines looking at what's actually going on, instead of giving the money to the people who are best at filling in the forms. To really find out what's happening you need more people on the ground.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thanks, Ronald.

We'll now move to Mr. Martin. You have seven minutes.

Mr. Tony Martin (Sault Ste. Marie, NDP): Thank you very much.

Thanks for being here this morning.

To Shawn, I think the committee and I would be very interested in getting the most recent, up-to-date statistics on welfare, if you have them. We hear a lot about EI and trying to get people on EI. I worry about those who aren't getting EI, and the ones who are falling off because they've been on EI for 50 weeks, or whatever, and what they're doing. We all know the difficulty, the low threshold of assets where welfare is concerned, and what that does to people. We know the EI stats. They're out there and we're talking about them. But we're not hearing much about the welfare stats, and it would be good to know those as well.

What should we be doing right now to lift people out of poverty? A number of provinces have taken some creative and courageous initiatives. I think we all know who they are: Newfoundland and Labrador, Quebec, and Ontario. When we were in Nova Scotia and New Brunswick a couple of weeks ago, we heard they are starting a strategy. They're all saying they can only go so far and then they'll need federal government help. They need the resources and the federal government to take the leadership role.

Years ago the federal government took leadership on some fronts that I think we still benefit from today. We passed legislation on health care with the Canada Health Act. We passed legislation on EI that has had an interesting life, and lately is being challenged for not really working as well as it could. We decided years ago it was unacceptable that seniors who built the country should live on welfare, so we brought in the Canada Pension Plan, the OAS, and the GIS. Even though some seniors struggle now, most are not living in the desperate poverty they used to live in. We have done some pretty major stuff.

If as a federal government we decided to move to put in place a framework and some legislation to do the same for people living in poverty so we could deal with 100% of those people now, as opposed to some now and some later, what would be the major pieces of that, as far as you're concerned?

Laura, you listed a few things at the beginning. In the context of legislation and federal legislation, considering the jurisdictional challenges we have in Canada, what do you think are the main pieces we should be zeroing in on and dealing with?

● (0905)

Mr. Daniel Cullen: I'll take that one very quickly.

What I was always taught is that the shortest way to get a problem done is the easiest route from point A to point B. The first thing you want to do is create a clear channel. The federal government, the provincial governments, the territorial governments, the regional governments, and the municipal governments need to work together, and there needs to be a clear access to the authority, the funders, right down to the front line. There needs to be a mechanism such that I don't have to jump through my manager and three other managers, and four other managers from another agency, before I even get to the decider of the funders. Moneys for the problem need to be quickly accessible, because it's a triage problem.

We have a national problem called homelessness. The report put out by the national research branch was “Homelessness: A National Disaster”. I first read it and “Poverty Hurts”. All those reports are showing that we have a definite problem. Take a look at it from a serious point of view.

Our triage theory would be opening up moneys available to front-line workers, moneys accessible immediately to address a problem that's immediate there, with immediate accountability on the person who receives the funds. You cannot just say, “Okay, I have an idea. Here, give me the money.” You have to show that it works and what the projected outcomes are. When that channel is opened up, you then have to open up and make it accessible for people like me or any other person to be able to come to the people who have the answers and say, “Okay, here's the problem.”

I'm getting off on a tangent. I'm sorry; I'll stop.

It takes national, provincial, regional—all levels of government have to open up. There has to be clear access.

I'll quit with this: on March 9, 1895, on the legislative assembly floor of Upper Canada, Richard Cartwright said that we must make sure that the cares of the few are not trampled under the caprice and the passion of the many. That's basically what's happening. We have to open up that channel federally, right down to the municipal level.

That's just my simple little idea, but I hope it helps a little bit.

The Chair: Go ahead, Shawn.

Mr. Shawn Pegg: Obviously that's an enormous question. I think overall one thing that I have noticed in the past number of years is perhaps a lack of respect for people who are poor. I think it stems from a certain blaming that happens. Poor people are blamed for being poor, essentially, and I think the first thing that has to be done in any strategy to address poverty is to start seeing people's capacities and assets.

I don't want to be political either, but just coming to my mind is perhaps one example, I feel, of this viewpoint. It is the closing of prison-based farming programs. I have no disrespect for the Conservative Party; this is just one example. I feel that there is perhaps a focus on what might be called the "deserving poor" in Canada: some people are picked out as deserving help from the federal, provincial, or municipal governments, whereas others are considered not to deserve the help.

In terms of big ideas, as you were discussing, a national disability support program is something that would work in the current political climate, given the situation with federal-provincial relations. Reading through testimony of people presenting previously to the committee, I saw that a pension-bridging program for workers over the age of 55 was talked about by some of the people from Quebec last month. I think it is a really great idea, because people over the age of 55 who've been working in manufacturing don't have it very easy, and I don't think their lives are going to be very nice until they hit an age when they can get CPP.

Those are a couple.

● (0910)

The Chair: Shawn, you talked about the cut to the federal penitentiary farming program. Just for the benefit of those who don't know what that is or was, could you tell us a little about it?

Mr. Shawn Pegg: It was a program that allowed people in prisons to be taken out to the surrounding community to work on farms. It was just basically a way of getting people out of the prison while helping farmers who needed help with labour, and much of the food would actually be donated to food banks. Funding for that program has been ended.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We're going to move to Mr. Vellacott.

Sir, you have seven minutes.

Mr. Maurice Vellacott (Saskatoon—Wanuskewin, CPC): Thank you very much, Chair.

Maybe I should clarify for Shawn's benefit and others here that with respect to the penitentiary program, it was not taking inmates off to farms at all. It was programs on farm management right at the site—

A voice: That's right.

Mr. Maurice Vellacott: —in Prince Albert and various ones like that. Work was done within the correctional institute itself. Then they sold off the meat or whatever it was. Actually, it competed, you might say, with others in that very same market, but that's not the issue so much.

For people here in Toronto, it may be good for them to understand that in western Canada, back in my grandfather's day, you made do with a quarter of land. Now you have sections and sections, so they are using big equipment. As for most of these individuals, I think few, if any, have gone back to work on farms. They worked there in corrections. Maybe that was good. We could say that as a work ethic kind of thing it's good in itself, but if the point of the program is actually to get people out working at those jobs thereafter, that wasn't working.

That wasn't happening throughout my riding and the ridings in and about Saskatchewan and in the Saskatoon area and so on. That was not occurring. I think the point is to try to get those people in jobs with marketable skills for after they are outside prison. That was the point of the reduction of that program, as I understand it, in western Canada, where the agriculture actually is.

Before I go to my questions, I do want to make some quick comments as well, though, with respect to literacy. I guess getting into a little bit of partisan comment from time to time is almost unavoidable here, and Mr. Ouellet, who is not here at present, did get into that to some degree. There were cuts to literacy lobbyists, if you will, and I think that's an important thing. It may not be acknowledged by people here or elsewhere, especially if they're part of that lobby crew, but there has been no reduction.

In fact, the Office of Literacy and Essential Skills invested $45 million this year for developing literacy and essential skills. They are doing both, and in so doing, yes, individuals whose purpose was basically lobbying governments, either provincial or federal, didn't get as much money. But what we see as the important thing is getting literacy happening on the ground. There have been no reductions. In fact, there are significant dollars going into that, with $500 million per year in new labour market agreements, with a significant part of that for literacy, and with an additional $150 million this year for language training for new Canadians, and then a task force to advise on a cohesive national strategy on financial literacy as well, which is important for people in handling their funds and budgets and so on.

I thought I should remark on that, because there is this great divide. People either think we should give dollars to lobby groups, which then lobby the government for things, or they are of the other view. I happen to be of the view, and the Conservative government is of the view, that you should actually get the dollars into the hands of people who teach literacy and do the literacy training. On that front, I'm not finding that there has been any diminishment of effort, but I would be interested to hear if there are necessary comments on that.

I have a question, Daniel. I thought your comments were rather interesting. You're a very articulate person and I appreciate your remarks here as someone who has experienced it and knows it on a first-hand basis. You made the comment that "at a point I determined I wasn't going to be a homeless man anymore". I'm intrigued by that remark. How much of a factor do you think this determination is, and how would that reference other people? Give me your life story here. What exactly do you mean by that?

● (0915)

Mr. Daniel Cullen: In 50 words or less?

Mr. Maurice Vellacott: In as many words as you need.

Mr. Daniel Cullen: Okay, I'll be careful, but thank you.

That was in Jackson's Point. On January 1, 2000, at 12:01 in the morning, I made that decision purposely. My life had spiralled down into 22 mental disorders, 3,000 milligrams of medication, institutionalization in psychiatric group homes, jails, shelters, streets, back alleys, blah, blah, blah. I wasn't a nice person and my life was way out of whack.

My saving grace was the fact that I read for 25 years in libraries from coast to coast. Whatever city I was in, I found myself in the library. I got smart, I guess, and when I was really sick and really in bad shape, it came to mind that I could change this because my mind was mine. It wasn't something I was born with; it was something I created; it was something that happened through experience. So I decided, okay, I'll take this moment and create something brand new. That's why I chose January 1, 2000, because it was never going to happen in any of our lives again, another 1,000-year millennium, so it was significant.

When I took that step of hope, I was still living in a group home, I was still on 3,000 milligrams of medication, I still had 22 mental disorders, but now I had something that I never had before. Nobody ever gave it to me; I had to give it to myself. That was hope.

How does it help in helping others? It helps an enormous amount. If you can give someone just a glimmer of reason, a glimmer of something to believe in, something that may be, then with that hope they can begin to build themselves.

I did that. I lacked a lot of support. In fact, I had almost no support. It has taken me nine years to go from sleeping in a back alley and in ditches to sitting at this table, and I did it purposely. I knew that one day I was going to be sitting at a government table, something with the government, to make the issue known about homelessness and poverty.

That's the honest-to-God truth. I knew I was going to be there. So with that hope in mind, I went forward.

You have to give those who are on the streets a reason to want to get off the streets. You cannot just come down to the streets on a Friday or Saturday afternoon. There have to be front-line workers. Those front-line workers have to invest in the community, just like a missionary does when he or she goes on the mission field.

I'm not preaching here, but when missionaries go on the mission field, they assimilate themselves into the community. They become part of that community. Then they can properly address the issues of the community they're dealing with. If you can find the front-line workers and invest in the front-line workers, for the front-line workers to be able to invest themselves into the community, then you'll start to see people who have hope. When you empower people, it's unstoppable what they can do.

I tell people this and I tell them this all the time: it should only take three years to get off the streets. It should only take three years to rebuild yourself after being chronically homeless. It took me nine years because I did it on my own.

Mr. Maurice Vellacott: I want to read the book you're going to write about your life story.

Mr. Daniel Cullen: I've already written a book.

Mr. Maurice Vellacott: I'd like to read it.

I was intrigued as well by the comments of Reverend Berresford, and I know Shawn would have some comments about the others. But in terms of the fundraising, you made a comment, Ron, in respect of something to the effect of fundraisers being brought in at the beginning. I know food banks have to raise a whole lot of money too, as do the other organizations. It's key. It's kind of at the heart of what you do.

What did you mean by that, fundraisers being brought in at the beginning?

Rev. Ronald Berresford: I'm involved with a group in Barrie, for example, that's looking to put up a permanent centre along the lines of what they did in Cambridge. We've been at this for a number of years now. You need to get the key driving person to put the thing together, and it hasn't happened so far.

On my last visit there, two or three people who have done a number of major projects in the city have said they've decided they're going to get this thing built. They're going to put together a plan. There are people who are already involved in local municipal politics, some town councillors. There's also a retired banker who's going to run the fundraising campaign. You have to get all the parties involved, the political people and the business people. You have to find the right people, people who can get the job done. Some people have a gift for raising money. You need to do that right from the start.

Patrick Brown, the MP there, keeps telling us, “Bring me a plan.” He wants to help, but he wants to see the plan. You have to show people a picture with a building. You have to show them your team, and then you work together with the government.

We did it before in Barrie. We had a program for training at-risk youth. We had a community group together, with the community college, the school board, and so on, and we got money through HRDC. We ran three classes that were highly successful. We taught basic carpentry skills.

● (0920)

Mr. Maurice Vellacott: So you're saying there was a variety of levels of broad-based support in the community.

Rev. Ronald Berresford: Yes, if you build a team right from the start, then your chance of success is better.

The Chair: Thank you.

I'm going to give the floor back to Ms. Minna before we wrap up.

Hon. Maria Minna: I'm going to go back to my model, because I think we need a national strategy. For me, that's not an issue; it's more how we go about it. One of the things I want to look at is what I call the tax expenditures. I mean the child care tax credits and all of those tax expenditures. If you add up all the tax expenditures, or these tax breaks or whatever...these are not income taxes but the tax varies. Some of them are for business. But some are social—they mean to deliver social services, but whether they're hitting the mark or not is never determined. If they were refundable taxes, they would make a difference, but they're not refundable at this point. Have any of you looked at the tax expenditures? Would you eliminate most or all of them and fold them into a direct income support structure, as opposed to working through the tax system? These are quite expensive right now.

Mrs. Patricia Smiley: You have to be careful when you distinguish between tax credits and tax benefits. Tax credits don't help lower-income people. You have to spend the money before you get it back.

Hon. Maria Minna: That's my point. Would you fold all of that into...?

Mrs. Patricia Smiley: That does not help reduce poverty. Tax credits just don't help.

As far as tax benefits are concerned—

Hon. Maria Minna: I'm sorry, I wasn't actually....

Mrs. Patricia Smiley: Anyway, I just wanted to make that clear.

Hon. Maria Minna: Tax benefits, I know...I wasn't talking about.... Sorry.

Ms. Laurel Rothman: Let's be specific. The UCCB is ineffective. It is $100 a month. Of course, people appreciate money in their pockets. But if one looks at its goals, one sees that it's not really delivering child care services. In most situations, there are not services to buy, and it's not enough to assist in buying services.

Let's look at it as an income transfer, which is what it is. I would suggest that it needs to be “reconciled” with the child benefit, which is progressive. That means that the lower the income you have, the more benefit you have; the higher the income, the less the benefit. It goes all the way up to about a $95,000 income. It's a small benefit in relation to the cost of raising children, which is important for our society. I think we have to look again at the UCCB, and also we look again at the new Canada child tax credit, the little one that I believe was announced in the 2008 budget, which also has no rationale in tax terms.

It is important to look at poverty reduction measures, but you also have to recognize the cost of raising children. I don't want to imply that we don't think that's important. It is important. Most of the European countries have some form of universal child benefit to assist a wide range of families. Some things can be done that will make the tax measures more effective, more equitable than they are now.

● (0925)

The Chair: Thank you.

That's all the time we have right now. I want to thank the witnesses for—

Rev. Ronald Berresford: Could I tell one quick story of how we can spend the money better?

The Chair: Sure.

Rev. Ronald Berresford: I was in the hospital one day, sitting with a chap who had been stabbed twice by his girlfriend the night before. That's one of the things we do. There was this screaming that broke out. Throughout the whole place you could hear this screaming. This was in the general hospital in Barrie. I went down the hall and there was a chap, one of my boys, who was off the roof on drugs. There were at least eight people around him—an emergency room is not the place for people coming off drugs.

One of the key recommendations in my report is that we have medical detox and detox centres. This could be done with a nurse practitioner. Emergency rooms in a hospital are no good for somebody coming off drugs. That's one of the things I've been advocating for a number of years. Perhaps we could use foreign doctors while they're getting their credentials.

The Chair: Most definitely.

Thank you, witnesses, once again.

The meeting is adjourned.

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