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Chair

Mr. Dean Allison

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

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● (0905)

[*English*]

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

I want to thank our witnesses for taking time out of their busy schedules to be here today. You may or may not know that we have been studying this issue of poverty across the country. We went to the east coast last year and then we had a break over the summer. We are glad that we are getting out to the west now and talking to people, where we can make some recommendations back to the government. Once again, we appreciate your taking time to be here.

When Ms. Small shows up we'll give her a chance to read into the record some of her comments.

Mr. Stewart, I'm going to start with you and we'll just go across for seven minutes each. After all the comments are made by the witnesses we'll have a chance to go around the room to ask some questions.

If you have briefs that haven't been translated, we'll make sure those get out to the members in due course. I'm going to just leave it at that.

We'll probably have time for one round of questioning. If we have more time, we'll certainly do what we have time for up to ten o'clock.

Mr. Stewart, thank you for being here once again. You're from the Aboriginal Homelessness Steering Committee. The floor is yours. You have seven minutes.

Mr. Patrick Stewart (Chair, Aboriginal Homelessness Steering Committee): Thank you.

Good morning, everyone, and thanks for the invitation.

I'd like to first acknowledge the Squamish, Musqueam, and Tsleil-Waututh nations, on whose traditional territory we're meeting.

My Nisga'a name is Luugiyoo, of the House of Daxaan, Village of Gingolx. I'm the chair of the Aboriginal Homeless Steering Committee for metro Vancouver and president of the National Aboriginal Housing Association.

On behalf of AHSC and NAHA, I'd like to thank the committee for listening to aboriginal Canadians about the challenges that we face in trying to reduce and ultimately eliminate poverty across this country.

However, the time has come to act. This issue has been studied to death for decades. You yourselves have listened to hundreds of hours of expert and community testimony this year and last and have accessed dozens if not hundreds of studies on poverty. So now is the time for action. Your job is a big one, and we are counting on each and every member of this committee to advocate for legislation to eliminate poverty in this country, especially within the aboriginal community, where it is estimated that almost 50 percent of aboriginal children live in poverty.

Poverty, like homelessness, is created by people and it can be solved by people. It will take governments at all levels working with civil society to move this issue onto the public policy agenda and forge the necessary political will to eradicate poverty.

I want to say things that will be useful, but in the back of my mind I'm suspicious of this government, based on its record, especially given that the Canadian government voted against the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People on Thursday, September 13, 2007. When this government voted against this declaration, they voted against aboriginal people in this country. So what am I to think?

I'm sure you've heard that over 150,000 children live in poverty in B.C. This is 13%, the highest percentage of any province. And for the sixth year in a row, it is higher than the national average, which is 9.5% . There are almost 700,000 children living in poverty right now, right here in this country. Children under 18 make up 37% of food bank users. One in four first nations children live in poverty. Nearly half of off-reserve first nations children under the age of six live in low-income families, compared with 18% of non-aboriginal children.

As an architect, I am frustrated working in first nations communities where sometimes 70% of the people living in the community are on social assistance. And the federal government is trying to push home-ownership in these communities. These communities are under-resourced. As a housing advocate, what do I tell a father with three kids living in a shelter that there are no apartments available at the end of the 30-day stay?

There is a lack of affordable housing being built. How is it in this country, this province, and this city that our one temporary adult aboriginal homeless shelter is at capacity every night, turning away dozens back onto the street? The aboriginal community does not have the same access to capital resources as the non-aboriginal community. However, on the program services side last year the AHSC members provided over 50,000 shelter-bed stays, over 40,000 meals, served 2,000 families at food banks, and provided over 9,000 people with services that helped to keep them off the streets.

Not that I'm an advocate for international agencies, but Canada is listed as one of the most livable countries on the UN Human Development Index—it moved from sixth to fourth this year. Yet there are 450 food banks in this country and aboriginal homelessness is increasing. For example, there was a 34% increase between 2005 and our latest count in metro Vancouver in 2008. This increase was attributed to rising unemployment, lack of affordable housing, lack of a living wage, and inadequate social assistance policies in this province.

You want to know what to do about poverty. You really want to know? I say do your job. Act like a federal government. Conduct business like a nation concerned for its citizens. Act on the Prime Minister's apology to residential school survivors. Enact legislation for an aboriginal poverty reduction strategy.

● (0910)

There are over 150,000 non-profit organizations doing the job of government in this country. Why? Stop offloading jurisdiction to the provinces and territories. Otherwise we are just handing down to our grandchildren the problems created by federal policies and lack of federal investment.

In the aboriginal community, for example, there are high incidences of adult incarceration: 79% in Saskatchewan and 71% in Manitoba; women incarcerated: 87% in Saskatchewan, 83% in Manitoba and Yukon; aboriginal youth in secure custody: 31%; aboriginal homelessness: 35% in B.C.; domestic violence: 33%; lack of high school education for aboriginal people: 43%; lack of university degrees: 6% for aboriginal people compared to 26% for non-aboriginal people; and 40% of foster children are aboriginal, with a high in Manitoba of 68%, plus similar statistics within the aboriginal community across this country for addictions, unemployment, illiteracy, and HIV/AIDS.

An aboriginal poverty reduction strategy needs to be comprehensive. It also needs to reflect reality to include services and supports on and off reserve. Such an aboriginal strategy needs to address input by aboriginal people into the design, structure, and operations of the national strategy; affordable and adequate housing designed culturally appropriately; income security and financial transfers, meaning a liveable wage and support for workers. In 2004 only 38% of unemployed Canadians were able to access EI, meaning 62% weren't.

On education and training, accessibility is an issue in the aboriginal community.

On child care, more funded spaces are needed.

On employment opportunities: financial transfers directly to communities based on community priorities on a needs basis; appointment of a cabinet minister committed to reducing aboriginal poverty across this country and not just housed within Indian affairs, as it isn't set up to address all the dimensions of aboriginal people; provinces and territories mandated to have their own aboriginal poverty reduction strategy that fits their jurisdiction.

B.C. must implement a legislative poverty reduction plan that includes the appointment of a cabinet minister committed to reducing poverty in this province. The aboriginal poverty reduction strategy should have a target of reducing the number of children living in poverty—I know you know this number—by 25% over five years, renewable on a five-year basis over 20 years.

In closing, I'd like to read a quote by Robert Rainer, the executive director of Canada Without Poverty. He wrote:

> The Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms both provide for the rights of "life, liberty and security of the person." But people in poverty, in general, have shorter lives, less liberty and less security of their person than their wealthier counterparts. Thus we can see how by preventing poverty, the health of millions of Canadians can be improved, the lives of many of them lengthened accordingly, and thus their right to "life" (as well their rights to liberty and security of the person) better supported. Moreover, by seizing poverty as a human rights issue and combating it more effectively, governments in concert with civil society will help reduce health care system costs. This is part of the transformative opportunity for Canada if fighting poverty is central to the public policy agenda.

[*Witness speaks in his native language*]

Thank you.

● (0915)

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Stewart.

We're now going to move to Mr. Lawson, from the First Nations Environmental Network of Canada. Mr. Lawson, the floor is yours for seven minutes, please.

Mr. Steve Lawson (National Coordinator, First Nations Environmental Network of Canada): Good morning, everyone.

My position as national coordinator for the First Nations Environmental Network of Canada is what brings me here. My position in life is to speak on behalf of the land and for the people. My family come from Shoal Lake, Lake of the Woods, Nishnawbe territory. I acknowledge the Musqueam territory here, and I'm thankful to be here.

I have experienced poverty, and I can tell you that it's not pleasant by any means, but what I see across the nation in the years that I've been travelling is a poverty that speaks at a far deeper level. The people I deal with on a daily basis are experiencing... When you don't have clean water, when the water carries chemicals and disease, and your families are dying—your elders, your children—no amount of material goods can make up for that, when the soil and the air are poisoned. The people in the communities that I speak to are like canaries in a coal mine. They live invariably next door to these resource extraction industries. It's something that's going to affect all of us, as people, as humans, but it always seems to affect them first, and hardest and most tragically.

It's a sad thing. As I say, no amount of material wealth can remedy that. When it comes down to what really makes us human, our emotions and what comes from our hearts is what is really important. We all recognize that, and when our days come to an end, our lives, we review our lives and think about what is really important.

One thing that appears to be happening across the country is that both government and industry, and now sadly, environmental groups, have been formed to facilitate the removal of resources. And when you have poverty on one hand and vast amounts of money being offered on the other, people have to make a really tough choice in taking the jobs, in taking the money, when it's going to ruin their land, it's going to ruin the future for their descendants. I was speaking to one young man yesterday who had worked for ten years earning a high wage driving a truck in the tar sands. He's now working for all he's worth to remove that industry from his territory, because he sees the deaths, the cancers. There was a doctor in his community who was charged with eight various trumped-up charges. He's been cleared finally, after several years. Just last month he was cleared of the last charge. He had to leave the community. Charges were brought by the industry against him because he brought to light the fact that people were dying of rare cancers. I've met some of the young people, in their early twenties, who have these rare cancers. They're living downstream from this type of industry.

● (0920)

There's more to poverty than financial means, and as I say, this is something that's happening all across the country. I'm heartened that there are people from these communities—elders and young people—who are very strong on this issue, but they're having a hard time because they're elected officials. All of the processes that have been put in place by the government are the ones that are being used against them. Their own people have turned against them. In virtually every community I know, they're divided. This is a position that's put forward by government and industry and these large foundations with vast amounts of money that are fronting themselves as environmental organizations. There is a lot of money changing hands, but it's bringing this type of long-term poverty that we're going to have a hard time ever pulling out of, because it takes a long time to remove the toxins from these places and to undo the tragedies that have taken place.

That's an aspect that I wanted to bring to this table, because it's something that I see all the time. It's really difficult. Government has to look seriously at its position and what it's doing, and if my voice can somehow bring that to the fore, then I thank you for this opportunity. It's all I can do, and I'm hoping that you will take this message seriously and take it to your heart, because it's going to affect us all.

Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Lawson. I appreciate that.

We're now going to move to Ms. Small, from the Vancouver Aboriginal Friendship Centre Society.

Ms. Small, we welcome you. You have seven minutes as well for your presentation. When you're ready, please begin. Thank you.

Ms. Sherry Small (Program Manager, Vancouver Aboriginal Friendship Centre Society): Thank you, and good morning.

My name is Sherry Small. My Nisga'a name is Anslutiksgah, having spiritual and moral worth.

As you heard, I am originally Nisga'a, born and raised there. I chose to live in a city. I am married to a black man from the United States, so I know what unity really means. I was raised with it and I live with it.

First of all, thank you for the invitation, which I got on Friday afternoon. So I come to you just as I look, with absolutely nothing other than a few scratchy notes here.

What I find at the Vancouver Aboriginal Friendship Centre is, number one, why does the urban aboriginal community exist? It is because of colonization. What did colonization do? It created poverty among the aboriginal people. How? It was because of the segregation of families, as you heard the former speakers talk about. Poverty does not necessarily mean just financial poverty. Also, due to the Indian Act, we are segregated from families, and many people at the urban aboriginal Vancouver centre are not there by choice. They are there because of the various types of disenfranchisement. If they were to return home, if they were eligible, they would not be able to fit in, because the segregation has been too long. Number one, people don't know them as closely as they should; number two, the land base is too small. Another thing is the fact that we grew up where we were taught how to live with the land, which means it had a lot of natural resources to live off. We were not chosen to live on the land, where we take from the land and not live with it, so our resources are very limited.

What we find at the friendship centre is we have a day care, we have sports and recreation, we have cultural activities where we allow people to practise eastern-style song, dance, and drumming and western-style song, dance, and drumming, on different nights. There is AA and Narcotics Anonymous. We have mental health advocates, where we as caregivers teach them how to advocate for themselves. We have the urban aboriginal representative who works this job on the side of their desk, because it is legislated in the province that child and family services have an urban aboriginal representative. This means that if you are of aboriginal descent but do not fit under the Indian Act—as defined by the Indian Act as Indian—and therefore are not affiliated with a band, you no longer exist anywhere. So urban aboriginal representatives are aboriginal people, by blood, but with no homeland base, with children in care, with all the luggage that comes with that.

As well, we have an urban aboriginal shelter, which we run very differently. We are very fortunate to have received an extension on this. We do not treat that as a homeless shelter. We allow our workers to assist in getting ready for their guests. We give dignity and respect with all the services that we provide. In the last three years it has worked absolutely wonderfully, but one thing we don't have is money. So we scrimp, scrap, and save as much as we can. In that area we do have poverty.

The urban aboriginal population is closing the gap between being part of the economy, but we are still behind—no doubt the statistics are right in your face—in education, employment, housing, child care, and health care, specifically mental health care. We are slowly changing, but as we get successful our money gets pulled back, and we have no money to operate in the way we would love to operate. That's what makes our programs and services unique. We build our programs and services based first and foremost on the philosophies and values of aboriginal people.

● (0925)

With that, I would like to say thank you very much for your time and thank you for listening. I hope you got a different definition of poverty.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Small. It was just over five minutes, so it was within the timeframe.

Ms. Sherry Small: Sorry. Thank you for allowing that.

The Chair: Don't be sorry. Thank you very much.

We're now going to move to our last witness for this panel. This morning we have Ms. Elsie Dean, from Women Elders in Action.

Welcome, Ms. Dean. The floor is yours, and you have seven minutes.

Ms. Elsie Dean (Research Director, Women Elders in Action): Good morning.

My name is Elsie Dean, and I'm a member of Women Elders in Action. I thank you for inviting us to appear before you today and present our observations and recommendations on reducing poverty in Canada.

Women Elders in Action is an organization of volunteer women elders in B.C. whose purpose is to provide a voice and raise awareness to improve socio-economic issues and justice for older women. In our work, of course we observe the growth of dependence on food banks, growing homelessness, and inadequately housed people on the street. We also know that many older women are living in dire circumstances and paying far too much of their income in rent. We focus on single women 50 years of age and older because far too many in this age group are experiencing unemployment or low-waged work leading to poverty in their later working years and of course into their retirement years.

It is well documented that there are systemic patterns linking women's higher rates of poverty compared with those of men. Women in this age category suffer as a result of a lifetime of inequality. So we recommend that government renew its commitment to equality and apply a gender analysis to all its macro-economic policies and its budgets and make a commitment of resources for programs that will make real change.

Women's disproportionate poverty and reliance on social programs, including social assistance and related social services, are well documented. Legislation and transfers that establish social programs and determine funding levels for them are indispensable practical vehicles that enhance women's human rights. We recommend the revitalization of the Canadian social union and a re-engagement of governments in the work of developing and sustaining social programs and services that meet Canada's human rights commitments to all. Give particular attention at this time to the need for the provision of affordable houses and adequate public services. We see particular groups of women who are experiencing even more difficult situations. Those are aboriginal women who we recognize as the poorest of the poor in Canada. We recommend that the government pay particular attention to ensuring that the human rights of aboriginal peoples are taken care of and are met, in particular the needs of women, by increasing social assistance, housing and health programs, increasing funding, and giving assistance for the aboriginal nations to develop their own sources of wealth.

We urge this government to get on with the land settlement on disputed lands. There's another group, which is immigrant women. Women from certain countries must live in Canada for ten years between the ages of 18 and 65 before they can collect even one-fortieth of their old age pension. This leaves many who are ineligible, even though they are Canadian citizens or have landed immigrant status, to live in dire poverty and work well into their old age, thereby destroying their health.

We feel this policy contravenes the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, and we recommend that access to the old age pension be granted to all who have lived in Canada for three years, are Canadian citizens, or have landed immigrant status. We believe that government has the economic capacity and the social responsibility to eliminate poverty and to provide a fair share of Canada's wealth to all peoples living in Canada. This can be done by implementing a progressive taxation policy, which we feel has been eroded over the last 20 years, and by designing adequate social transfers. We know that the system we live in is not perfect in its distribution of wealth, and it is the job of government to make it so.

● (0930)

Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Dean.

We'll now start, as we always do, with a round of questions of seven minutes. If we have extra time, we'll go to a second round. I'll first have my colleagues over here on my left, starting with the Liberal Party and Mr. Savage, to have seven minutes for questions and answers and then we'll move to Mr. Martin and then Ms. Cadman.

Mr. Savage, the floor is yours, sir.

Mr. Michael Savage (Dartmouth—Cole Harbour, Lib.): Thank you very much.

Thank you all for coming and for the very impassioned presentations that you've given us.

As the chair has mentioned, we've been working on this for a long time. The way Parliament works is that committees sit while Parliament sits, and this started before the last election. Earlier this year we went east, and we almost had to change our schedule again because of what was happening in Ottawa. That's why it's a little bit smaller contingent this morning, but we need to get this on the record and we need to produce a report.

Mr. Stewart, you said that we've done a lot of study on poverty in Canada. We have. I have all kinds of reports here that make recommendations, so we have an idea of what needs to be done. We do need some political will. You mentioned the UN Convention on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, which Canada hasn't signed. Canada also rejected a recommendation from the UN on the periodic review that recommended that Canada have an anti-poverty strategy. And they rejected that while this committee is holding anti-poverty hearings, so we're hoping that the good intention and the strength of our Conservative committee members here, who are working very hard on this, will mean that the federal government will decide we need to have an anti-poverty strategy, as six provinces have. B.C. doesn't have one as yet.

Is B.C. working on some kind of anti-poverty strategy? Are any of you aware of that?

● (0935)

Mr. Patrick Stewart: I haven't heard.

Mr. Michael Savage: A number of you mentioned food bank usage. As you know, the food banks came out with their annual report recently. I'm going to read you part of it here:

> For the most recent year, self-identified First Nations, Métis, and Inuit people comprised 12% of those assisted by food banks. Provincial figures vary considerably, with Aboriginal people accounting for 91% of food bank clients in the territories and 35% in the four western provinces.

In B.C. about 20% of food bank usage is identified as aboriginal, and I think in B.C. the food bank rate went up around 15% on the food bank support of a couple of weeks ago.

What we want to do is identify the best strategies that we should put in a report to reduce poverty, and in our draft report in June there were a few ideas that were specifically referencing aboriginal people. Let me read a couple of them to you.

> Following up on commitments originally made in the Kelowna Accord, provide adequate resources to improve the living conditions and infrastructure in aboriginal communities, provide better support to indigenous educational institutions, improve access to post-secondary education, address the gap in well-being between aboriginal children and other non-aboriginal children by providing additional funding to social programs such as aboriginal head start, the Canada pre-natal nutrition, community action plan for children, funding for child welfare agencies.

And there's the housing piece. Not only do we have to have the right housing strategy, you then have to get the money out the door. If you read *The Globe and Mail* this morning, there's a story there that only 1% of money identified for social housing, going back to last year, has gotten out the door.

I'd like to ask each of you if there would be two specific policy measures—by specific, they could be broader than one targeted measure, but give me one or two things that you think should be a priority in dealing with the issues that you face every day.

Ms. Elsie Dean: I feel at the moment that there should be a housing program. We have to get the people off the streets. This is disgraceful. Secondly, I feel that our health care is being eroded. Presently, of course, there's a court case where the private for-profit clinics are challenging the Health Act and the B.C. Health Act, I believe. This is of great concern to many people, because of all the programs that are important for older women and men, it is health care, adequate housing and adequate health care.

Mr. Michael Savage: Thank you.

Ms. Small.

Ms. Sherry Small: Thank you for the question.

It's very difficult to put a priority on something like that when you're thinking from an aboriginal perspective.

Food banks—can I give you ideas on each of those very quickly? I see what's working at the Vancouver Aboriginal Friendship Centre. We don't rely just on food banks. We're now re-teaching our elders how to can salmon and all the various foods—vegetables and fruit—because that's the way we used to be. But where do we get the money to access salmon, vegetables, and fruit? Through donations. But if we had adequate resources that could go a lot further than just our elders.

Education... At the Vancouver Aboriginal Friendship Centre we are appalled by the lack of understanding of the history of aboriginal people, the real history in a non-threatening way, right from the very well-educated to those walking on the street. We teach shared cultural experience at the friendship centre. We share with them what this means, the colonization, how to understand today's issues in relation to that and how to go forward in partnership. So education could be done slightly differently.

Housing... At our shelter we provide dignity to people; they are guests, not people off the street. We provide life skills because that's what they're hungry for. They wonder how they're going to survive in the event they get into a home. We've had over 100 people put into a home without life skills, how to maintain a home. Then of course we're gradually getting them into education and jobs.

● (0940)

Mr. Michael Savage: Let me just say the aboriginal friendship centres do a marvellous job across the country in taking a holistic view of their clients.

Ms. Sherry Small: If you want to take a 10- to 15-minute tour, I'd love to give it to you, and you will see first-hand what we're talking about.

The Chair: Thank you.

Thank you, Mr. Savage.

That's all the time we have. In the last couple of weeks I had a chance to visit our own friendship centre in the Niagara area in Ontario, and I echo what Mike says: you guys are doing a fantastic job.

Mr. Martin, sir, the floor is yours, and you have seven minutes.

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

First, I want to say that Libby Davies sends her regrets that she can't be here this morning. She would have loved to have been. She tried really hard to organize her time so that she could, but as Mr. Savage said earlier, things are happening in Ottawa today and that has called a lot of us back who would have been listening to you. I have to tell you we're listening and we'll take back what we hear and we will work together to try to come up with a strategy or a national plan that will honour and respect your experience and your input.

The further down the chain you get, it gets very complicated. What I'm looking for is if there's something at the federal level that we could do that wouldn't take forever, that would be strategy, an initiative that would touch all the people you speak so eloquently about to lift them to a place where they can live in dignity. You mentioned a national aboriginal anti-poverty strategy, housing, education, and health care. Is there something specific we could take back and say if we do this, this will make a difference? Maybe since we heard from Elsie and Sherry just a few minutes ago, we'll give Patrick and Steve a chance to speak to this.

Mr. Steve Lawson: There is one thing I can think of. I'm just going to pick this one example. In the area where I live on Vancouver Island—I've been there for more than 50 years—there are five of the six un-logged, un-mined, natural, wild in a sense, rivers. In this area there is a huge concentration of fish farms. Our salmon in that area are on the verge of extinction. They are in the same situation as the salmon in the Fraser. It has been proven scientifically, peer-reviewed by the best fisheries scientists around the world, that the cause of this demise is, for the very most part, the proliferation of sea lice by the fish farms. There is no way the fish farms can exist in that area and produce these billions and billions of sea lice that prey upon the young salmon as they come out of the rivers. Those fish farms must be removed from the ocean if there are going to be fish to feed the people, the bears, the wolves, the eagles, and all the wild creatures we exist with. When we speak about poverty, this is a looming reality.

Studying it in a commission for the next two years—I don't know how long it is going to take to write another report—is just buying another cycle of fish leaving and returning. This has to be done immediately.

That is one example of the things I'm dealing with that could be done in a short time, and the moment it is done it will remedy the situation.

● (0945)

Mr. Tony Martin: Patrick.

Mr. Patrick Stewart: The one thing I was thinking of is that Libby Davies' bill has been passed, as I understand it.

Mr. Tony Martin: No, it hasn't. It is in committee. We'll be dealing with it when we get back.

Mr. Patrick Stewart: Okay.

To me, that is one thing that needs to be done. There needs to be a national housing strategy. Having read the text of that, I know it refers to aboriginal communities, but my fear is that it's a limited description and gets to be understood as reserve communities only. The aboriginal population in the urban areas isn't included in the way it is written. That is one thing I had some concern about. The housing is definitely needed. In metro Vancouver we have three aboriginal urban non-profits. The three combined have a wait list of more than 5,000 people and there are no allocations. We have no federal dollars for housing. We have no provincial dollars for housing right now. Everybody is clawing back, and it's not acceptable. Housing has to be the foundation of this.

Mr. Tony Martin: From what you said earlier, I was looking for a plan that would lift everybody out of poverty, if we could at all, the same as when we brought in the Canada Pension Plan. We lifted all seniors up to a level. Now many of them are back in trouble again. But we, as a government, lifted them out of some pretty desperate circumstances.

This morning I hear there may be a need for a specific aboriginal anti-poverty plan. Are you suggesting there needs to be a separate focus on aboriginal poverty?

Ms. Sherry Small: You used the word "aboriginal". I would prefer to use "urban aboriginal", because I represent urban aboriginals. The first nations are taken care of very well under the federal government because that is a fiduciary responsibility.

What is the name of your executive council group, the Vancouver Urban...?

Mr. Patrick Stewart: It is the Vancouver Aboriginal Council.

Ms. Sherry Small: Vancouver Aboriginal Executive Council. They started the strategy there that would be really good to take a look at in this regard, because all the different things are represented there: housing, health services, and what have you. The group of people are all executive directors from various urban aboriginal societies who meet to look at how to work together in unison.

One of the things we did was say "Let's put unity back into community. Let's work together as one. Who delivers what better?" Lu'ma Native Housing Society has quality housing, very good urban aboriginal housing. We would look at someone like that to do that kind of stuff. Then the friendship centre does something very specific. Then there is education, a native education centre that does education. So they come together and talk about that. They would be the group, I would think, in Vancouver under aboriginal that you would look at to talk about poverty and solutions for that. In that way, you would have very focused goals and objectives to meet in modules—not a one-time thing—to gradually get you out of poverty.

● (0950)

The Chair: Thanks, Tony, that's all the time we have.

We're going to move now to Ms. Cadman for the last questions and the last seven minutes.

Ms. Dona Cadman (Surrey North, CPC): Good morning.

First off, I'd like to ask you, are you all considered elders?

Ms. Sherry Small: No.

Mr. Patrick Stewart: No.

Ms. Dona Cadman: Have any of you lived on the reservations?

Ms. Sherry Small: I have.

Mr. Patrick Stewart: Yes.

Ms. Dona Cadman: Can you tell us a bit what it's like there, compared to what you're living in now?

Ms. Sherry Small: For me, that's where I received my philosophy and values, which I find very useful to where I'm at today. Unfortunately, when we were under the Indian Act we were governed by the Indian Act, which allowed us to be in poverty. Now that we're under treaty, almost ten years come May, it's very difficult to get out of bad habits. How we were taught to be governed under the Department of Indian Affairs is very top down, whereas our traditional way is from the grassroots up. So it's very difficult to make that transition. In a nutshell, that's my personal experience.

Ms. Dona Cadman: This is touchy. There have been stories of chiefs taking government money and then using it for themselves or their families and it not being trickled down to the people who need it. Is this the truth?

Ms. Sherry Small: I think that's a very personal question to ask the various agencies. That needs to be specific. Hearsay information I personally would not respond to.

Ms. Dona Cadman: Mike.

The Chair: We have about five minutes left.

Mr. Michael Savage: I would like to talk a little bit about poverty among seniors. One of the acclaimed successes of Canada in the last number of years has been that we have reduced poverty among the elderly from 29% about 30 years to 5.4% in 2006. It's an area in which Canada has had success. However, as you pointed out, we still have some real problems, and I'm referencing a report from the Caledon Institute, who do some great work on this stuff. In particular, 16.1% of single elderly women live below the poverty line, and many more live just barely above the poverty line.

Again, in terms of reducing poverty in Canada, I think someone referenced child poverty as being 9.5%. I think that was the number from Statistics Canada of the percentage of children living in poverty as of 2007, which had also come down, but I suspect both of those numbers have gone up in the last year because of the difficulty the economy has been in. One of the measures often cited for the success in reducing poverty among seniors has been strengthening pensions but also particularly the guaranteed income supplement, which goes to the lowest-income seniors.

I wonder, Ms. Dean, is that a mechanism that we should be making more robust as a priority, as a way to immediately inject money into the system for low-income seniors?

Ms. Elsie Dean: It becomes very difficult looking at these statistics, because it depends on how you're measuring poverty. If you think about it, the greatest amount of income a person can have if they depend on the GIS is under $15,000. That's for a single person. If they have no earnings, the most they receive is just under $1,200 a month. Now, in our books, we look at the LICO, the low-income cut-off, which says that to live in the community with dignity, a single person requires an after-tax income of some $1,700. It is around that figure. We consider that person who's receiving under $1,200 a month to be in poverty, because they're several thousand dollars below what we feel people should have to live comfortably.

What has happened in the last few years, with the price of housing, is that many of the seniors we work with are paying 50% to 70% of their income on rent. There are very few available low-cost rentals in Vancouver. So they have to compete for those low-cost rentals, which might be around $700 or $800 a month. I know several people who are paying that kind of money who are receiving under $1,200 a month.

I guess it's how you look at it. For instance, a disabled woman who I know gets $947 a month. Not quite half of it is supposed to be rent, so she gets just under $400 to pay her rent. How can she live on that? Is she not in poverty? Of course she is. So it depends, you see.

I get very confused reading all these studies. I've just read the latest study for 2009. It came from the National Seniors Council, a federal body. You can't understand it, because it doesn't tell you what type of measurement they're using. We look at what is really happening with people on the ground. We communicate with women around the province, and we talk about women's problems. That's where we're coming from.

We feel that LICO is a good measure. Now we know that there are other measures, but they all work out pretty well the same. Yes, we have observed and we realize that there's more poverty. For instance, for single women, when we put them against the measure of the LICO, we find that between 40% to 45% live at very low if not poverty levels. So that's a greatly different figure.

Now, if you put seniors against the whole population of Canada, you might say that they are doing fairly well. There's not as high a rate of unemployment. But we believe that each person counts, and that if you take a group of people, and at least 40% of those people live with inadequate income, that's poverty, and it needs to be dealt with.

● (0955)

The Chair: You can have just a quick one, and then we're going to wrap up.

Mr. Michael Savage: I agree with everything you said, and it's a very learned position. In terms of putting together a strategy, we have to have some specifics. It seems to me, and I'm sensing that you would agree, that we have to specifically target those who are most in need. Reducing the GST by a couple of points helps everybody save a penny on a coffee, but it doesn't do much for low-income seniors. That money could be used. I'm not advocating on tax policy at this committee, but the GIS is one area that specifically targets low-income seniors. If we ratcheted that up significantly, that would probably make life a lot better for those who need it most.

Ms. Elsie Dean: Absolutely; we advocate and we ask government to do that.

Mr. Michael Savage: It's a federal responsibility.

Ms. Elsie Dean: It's the federal government. That is a federal program. That would make a big difference.

Next year we are facing a new tax. We've done some research on that new tax, and it's going to really affect seniors quite significantly. You have to look at the basket of goods seniors use.

There's another thing in looking at the statistics. We look at the LICO and ask if it is that much cheaper to live in a small town. We find that it isn't today. Groceries are higher. Rents are getting up there to pretty well the same. Yet in looking at it, the government says that you don't need as much to live in small towns. We don't agree with that. We think you need to look at that, too.

The Chair: Thank you.

I want to take the time again to thank the witnesses for taking time out of their schedules to be here today. We are going to continue to hear from more witnesses throughout the day. What we got on record is very helpful, so thank you very much.

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(Pause)

●

● (1005)

The Chair: I want to thank all our witnesses for being here as we get started back for our second panel of witnesses this morning. I will just quickly go over the fact that we've been looking at this issue over the last year. We've been out to the east and now we're here in the west, and we want to thank you all very much for taking time out of your busy schedules to be here.

We're going to start with Ms. Swanson, and we'll move ourselves across. You have seven minutes for your opening testimony. We'll try to facilitate as many rounds of seven-minute questions and answers as possible, maybe followed by a second round if we have time.

Ms. Swanson, welcome. I believe you're from the Carnegie Community Action Project. We're looking forward to hearing what your thoughts are this morning.

Ms. Jean Swanson (Co-ordinator, Carnegie Community Action Project): I'm Jean Swanson, and this is April Smith. She is also one of our Carnegie Community Action Project volunteers.

The first thing I want to do is acknowledge that we're on unceded Coast Salish territory and to thank the Coast Salish people for allowing us to be here.

We call our group CCAP. We're accountable to about 5,000 members of the Carnegie Community Centre Association. We work to get better and more housing in the downtown eastside, which is the poorest postal code neighbourhood. It's about seven blocks east of here. We also work to get higher incomes for low-income people and to stop gentrification.

Every Friday a CCAP volunteer group of about 20 people meets for lunch and to work on these issues. The volunteers are homeless. They live in the crappiest housing in Canada, SROs with no bathrooms and no kitchens and plenty of cockroaches and bedbugs, and we also live in social housing. At the end of every meeting we have a moment of silence for someone who has died, and I'll come back to that.

I was just looking at the 2005 Statistics Canada wealth study. It has absolutely stunning information in it. In the six years between 1999 and 2005 the total net worth of Canadians increased nearly 42%, but the poorest fifth actually got poorer in that period by 70%. That was while the richest fifth increased their net wealth by 43%. I photocopied the page from Statistics Canada that says this. If this trend continues, how much will the poor have lost by 2011? How much will the rich have gained? What about by 2017? What nightmare will our society be like if this inequality continues and gets worse?

The other astounding fact from the wealth study was that the poorest fifth—which means us in our CCAP group, among others—have an average net worth of minus $2,400. We have no wealth—we're in debt. The richest fifth have an average net worth of about $1.3 million.

I want to describe our community, the downtown eastside. Seventy percent of downtown eastside residents have low income and are among the poorest fifth of Canadians. CCAP just finished a two-year consultation process with 1,200 low-income people in the downtown eastside. Our study revealed that the downtown eastside is a strong community with lots of amazing assets. We're very accepting and non-judgmental. We have a lot of empathy for people who are suffering. We have an authentic cultural heritage. We put in hundreds of thousands of hours of volunteer work to build our community. We recycle, and we have some great services, many of which we started ourselves, and we work for social justice. We fought for our park, our safe injection site, our community centre, our missing women. Still, 700 of us are homeless and 3,500 live in one-room hotel rooms, and some people have health and addiction issues.

I'll talk a little bit about the history. We've always been poor, but not as desperate as today. Nearly everyone had some sort of housing 30 years ago, and welfare's purchasing power was about $250 a month more than today. Minimum wage was 122% of the poverty line. Now it's about 80%, and it's about 60% for our inexcusable $6 an hour so-called training wage.

In the 1980s a federal-provincial housing program built close to 700 units of good-quality new social housing in Vancouver per year. Now there is no federal housing program, and the new social housing we get is a drop in the bucket compared to what we need.

As in other communities, some people in our community and in our CCAP volunteer group use drugs that are now illegal. We value these human beings and want policies and programs that will save lives and help people to get healthy. We think harm reduction works.

There is another new Statistics Canada report that says poverty is twice as bad as cancer in terms of causing poor health and early death. This report says poverty—and we would say the government policies that cause poverty—is robbing poor people of about ten years of their lives. I have attached an article on that. Our lives in the downtown eastside are proof of this statistic. This is why we have a moment of silence at every one of our meetings. A lot of people in the downtown eastside die.

Our society doesn't know how to end cancer, but we do know how to end poverty.

● (1010)

We need our social programs back. We need a national housing strategy like every other developed country. We need a decent minimum wage of at least $11 an hour. We need a government that will tax the richest 10% or 20% to help fund these programs, and we need to replace the present illegal drug market with a regulated legal drug market based on public health and human rights.

We'd like your help in making our federal government do these things.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Swanson.

We're now going to move over to Ms. Manning, from the Ray-Cam Co-operative Community Centre. Ms. Manning, thank you for being here. The floor is yours for seven minutes.

Ms. Stephanie Manning (President, Ray-Cam Community Association, Ray-Cam Co-operative Community Centre): Thank you. On behalf of the board of directors, staff, and members of the Ray-Cam Co-operative Community Centre, I would like to thank the committee for giving me the opportunity to raise our concerns with you.

I will begin by giving you some background on the Ray-Cam Centre and the community we serve.

The Ray-Cam Co-operative Community Centre is located at East Hastings Street and Raymur Avenue in the Vancouver downtown eastside Strathcona neighbourhood. Founded in 1979 by the tenants of the Raymur Housing Project, the facility has evolved into full community centre status with the assistance of two committed community associations. New immigrants, refugees from around the world, and a multi-ethnic community of all ages are offered a wide range of recreation programs and activities and such services as preschool and day care, a youth room, family support programs, a computer room, a weight room, a dark room, and a full-sized gymnasium. This centre also boasts a diverse team of staff, volunteers, and a strong working committee comprised of area residents.

Vancouver's downtown eastside neighbourhood has a population of approximately 18,000 residents. About 70% live in the Strathcona and Oppenheimer sub-areas within easy walking distance of the Ray-Cam Centre. In 2006, just over 64% of downtown eastside residents were considered low income as defined by Statistics Canada. The vast majority of residents using Ray-Cam's services can be classified as poor. Many are new Canadians, and a number of families are headed by single parents.

The Ray-Cam Centre is located next to Stamps Place housing, formally the Raymur Housing Project, which is owned and managed by B.C. Housing. It is just down the street from MacLean Park senior housing complex. Approximately 5,000 downtown eastside residents live in social housing. The downtown eastside is notorious as a haven for drug addicts and the mentally ill as well as for the street disorder in the community. The vast majority of Vancouver's services community is ghettoized here, and most of the health and social service dollars that flow into the neighbourhood are targeted to deal with those issues.

Local children, seniors, and families are constantly under-resourced, while their vulnerability leads to further victimization by predators drawn to the community. Children in the neighbourhood are in particular need of help. Recent statistics compiled by the B.C. organization First Call demonstrated that for the sixth year in a row, B.C. has the highest rate of child poverty in Canada. The child poverty rate in the Ray-Cam neighbourhood is much worse than the B.C. average. Studies show that disadvantaged children are entering kindergarten unprepared, and that a wide gap in capacity to learn exists between lower- and higher-income children even before kindergarten.

Further research demonstrates that children who lack the skills and support necessary to succeed in school are disproportionately likely to adopt a high-risk lifestyle as they enter their teenage years. According to the RAND Corporation California preschool study, by the time children in poor families are four years old, they have been exposed, on average, to 32 million fewer spoken words than have those whose parents are professionals. Children who would benefit most from a high-quality learning experience are the least likely to attend centre-based preschool programs that develop language and higher-order thinking skills that prepare them for school.

The same study found that of 50 children who have trouble reading in grade one, 44 still have inadequate reading skills in the fourth grade. Over the last nine years, the University of British Columbia's Human Early Learning Partnership has been measuring the school readiness of B.C. children. The project, led by Dr. Clyde Hertzman, clearly indicates that children in Strathcona are the most vulnerable group in the province on every scale.

● (1015)

Worse, each data wave has found increasing vulnerability among children in this neighbourhood. They are now at the highest risk of school failure among groups measured in all urban centres in the province.

To further compound the problem, there has been a recent upward surge in the population of vulnerable infants to six-year-olds living in the Strathcona area. The problems faced by the children in the downtown eastside and Strathcona area clearly illustrate the need for the federal government to address the issue of child poverty and early childhood development.

As difficult as the problems are in our community, we are by no means unique in Canada. Ray-Cam is heartened by the HUMA committee's goal, supported last week by the resolution in the House of Commons, to develop an immediate plan to eliminate poverty in Canada.

In the Ray-Cam area this will entail developing more direct government support mechanisms. Reducing tax rates has little effect for families earning low wages, and none at all for those on social assistance. The current child subsidy program ends up being used mainly to feed children who would otherwise go hungry.

At Ray-Cam, we understand the financial challenges of developing universal programs targeting early childhood issues. While universal access is the long-term goal, for now we believe the government should look seriously at developing programs and policies targeted to Canada's most vulnerable communities to foster equitable development opportunities for children without the family resources to meet those needs.

Low-income residents in the Ray-Cam area face one further challenge that we believe the committee and the Government of Canada must address. Current income assistance programs are a hodge-podge of different supports, each with their own regulations and requirements. The goals of some are undermined by the restrictions imposed by others. Many apply only to people receiving social assistance, often leaving the working poor in worse straits when they achieve employment. Certain issues are not addressed at all, and it becomes painfully easy for families in need to fall through the cracks in bureaucratic programs.

Ray-Cam understands that many of these problem programs are currently administrated by the provinces. Over the short term, we ask the committee to recommend that the government adopt more comprehensive guidelines for goals to be achieved through fund transfers to provincial governments.

Over the long term, Ray-Cam endorses the Government of Canada to eliminate poverty. We encourage the committee to consider a plan that will consolidate and simplify support systems. We further propose that such a plan supports the efforts of individuals seeking education, training, and employment through a graduated assistance reduction plan, one that will ensure families receive full support and encouragement to rejoin and remain in the workforce. Senator Hugh Segal's proposal for the adoption of a guaranteed annual income is an approach that could significantly address this long-term goal.

On behalf of the board of directors, staff, and members of the Ray-Cam Co-operative Community Centre, I would like to once again thank the committee for its work and commitment. The fulfilment of your work will make a significant positive difference to the lives of the families in our communities.

Thank you.

● (1020)

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Manning.

We're now going to move to Chief Fred Sampson, from the Nicola Tribal Association.

Welcome, Mr. Sampson. Thank you for being here. You have seven minutes, sir.

Chief Fred Sampson (Nicola Tribal Association): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

[*Witness speaks in his native language*]

It's an honour to be here in the coastal territory once again, down here in friends' territory.

This was very short notice for me, so I don't have very many speaking notes. Of course, for the issues I'm going to speak on, there aren't a lot of statistics. I'm going to talk about first nations economy and the poverty related to the salmon resource in British Columbia. I'm only speaking specifically for my community, the Siska Indian Band, and it's a member of the Nicola Tribal Association, so I am speaking on behalf of those other seven communities as well. I can't speak for other communities in regard to their relationship to the salmon resource and the economies they derive from salmon in their traditional territories, but I am going to speak very seriously about my area in the Fraser Canyon.

For the last three years we have been very, very hard-pressed to catch any salmon in our community. As a main provider in my community, I fish for extended families, single mothers, and elders. My family alone will harvest 600 to 700 salmon, which is distributed out to community members, single parents, and elders. For the last three years that has been very, very difficult to do. This year alone my family ate one sockeye salmon—one. I got calls from elders and single parents in the Merritt area and extended bands because they had relied on us to provide them with fish, and they haven't had that this year. So there's a huge, huge impact on my community and the fish economy and how that salmon resource supplements their income and their economy.

We worked with the University of British Columbia and we did a project called The Creator's Gifts, looking at the gifts that were here on the land that first nations people utilize. Of course, in our area salmon was one of the predominant ones. Prior to contact, our community was wealthy—very, very wealthy—because of the valuable trade commodity of wind-dried salmon. Fraser-bound wind-dried salmon has been found in archeological digs down in the States, in Ontario, and in Manitoba, so it was a huge, huge trade economy. Prior to contact we were rich.

During the transformative changes when first nations were slowly removed from that fishery and the economy of that fishery, intense poverty began. Even in the current status of where we are today through such cases as the Supreme Court decision on Sparrow and aboriginal peoples' right to make a moderate living from the fish resource, well, it's non-existent. When you look at the statistics, there are no statistics out there on this relationship between salmon and first nations poverty.

We did research on The Creator's Gifts to talk about how much salmon actually gets consumed in our community. Because of the high levels of unemployment—over 90% are unemployed—you're either working on the railroad or you're working in the bush in the Lytton area. Those are pretty well your options for long-term employment, and everybody knows that the forest industry has crashed. The railroads have cut back hugely and have been laying off people, so the economy in my community really has risen, and the need for the fish resource became even more paramount.

We worked with UBC and we went through and talked to all of our households about how much salmon they consumed in a year. If you look at Statistics Canada, I think they recommend three or four ounces per week. Even based on that, each household would have to have a minimum of 64 salmon per person per year. We're not even getting close to that. So now you have people who are on social assistance, who cannot put that high-quality protein on the table. They are then stuck going to the store and buying that low-grade, crappy hamburger and store-bought food—and the low-grade store-bought food. They're buying pasta and rice and potatoes and flour, so they have a really terrible, terrible diet, and it affects their economy.

I guess it's awfully difficult trying to share this with the panel, because there isn't a lot of research being done out there on how this and the lack of salmon relates to poverty in first nations communities. Specifically, as I was saying, once again, I'm talking about my community. Other communities along the coast aren't as impacted as the ones that are inland, because they get a crack at the fish before we do.

● (1025)

I guess I'm asking the standing committee how it can assist first nations so that they are fully engaged and involved in co-management of the salmon resource as it relates to first nations' poverty.

In our community we developed the very first inland communal commercial fishery, and we were trying to increase employment and the economy around our fish resource, but it has failed miserably because there are no fish. This last year we tried to process pink salmon, and of course it was impossible, because our facility is so small. It produces only 30,000 fish, and we don't have the capacity to compete in the big market where they're harvesting millions of these things. That's one of the biggest challenges.

Is there a way this standing committee can assist first nations communities in the replacement of that protein source? I know what they have down in the States. Whenever their returns don't happen the American government steps in and compensates those first nations so that they can have a way to put that protein back on the table. That is certainly something that this province or the Government of Canada should be doing. When the salmon resource crashed, there should have been some way for them to provide resources to first nations people so that they could put that protein back on their table again, however it was done. They do it in other places, and it's something I would certainly like to see this committee do.

That's basically what I came here today to say. I had very short notice, and I can speak directly only to the poverty in my community and its relationship to the salmon resource. Is there any way this committee can encourage government to engage first nations so that they can be fully involved in co-management of the resource, and try to encourage government to find a way to supplement first nations communities when the salmon resource does crash?

Kukstsemc. Thank you very much.

● (1030)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Sampson. You were pretty much right on the seven minutes. Thank you very much.

We're going to now move over to the Salsbury Community Society, with Mr. Tim Dickau, who is a board member there.

Tim, welcome. Thanks for being here. You have seven minutes.

Mr. Tim Dickau (Board Member, Salsbury Community Society): Thank you.

I'm from the Salsbury Community Society. It's an organization that grew out of the Grandview Calvary Baptist faith community in east Vancouver.

I want to tell you a story about Jeff. Jeff is a man who struggled with depression and drug addiction most of his adult life. We met Jeff ten years ago, when he first came to Out of the Cold, our weekly meal and overnight shelter at our church building in east Vancouver. Jeff slept overnight and we started to get to know him better. He returned the following week.

About two months later, some folks who were participating in the Out of the Cold shelter invited Jeff to live with them in one of the community houses that had started. We have six of these houses in our neighbourhood where people live together and seek to welcome others to live with them who are poor or vulnerable, like Jeff. As Jeff became part of this supportive community his abilities started to come to life.

However, Jeff had many barriers to employment and struggled for a couple of years to find work. Jeff was one of the reasons that we started Just Work, an organization that develops social enterprises, including businesses in pottery, gardening, catering, and repairs. Jeff eventually found meaningful work and employment through both the gardening and catering businesses, and his life is in a very different place today. Jeff has come to life, you might say.

I think Jeff's story illustrates what we have discovered at the Salsbury Community Society. Through a supportive community that offers emergency help, long-term housing, employment, and resources, transformation can happen in people's lives and in our neighbourhoods.

Through the Salsbury Community Society, an umbrella organization that brings together seven different initiatives offering housing, employment, and community support to the poor and the vulnerable, over the last ten years we have seen that if these resources are available for people, if they have the opportunity, a change can occur. With a budget of just under $1 million for Salsbury, very little of which comes from any government source, we've seen the possibilities when these resources are available.

We've become convinced of two things. One thing is that the federal government has a greater role to play in developing homes and employment for those with barriers to meaningful work. We've had to rely on private funding for most of these ventures because there's very little public funding available. Secondly, we need to be investing in communities with a track record of welcoming those experiencing discrimination and developing resources that lead to transformation. Some of those groups have already spoken today. We believe the federal government is the only body in Canada to bring this comprehensive, big-picture view to reducing poverty and homelessness in Canada.

As a society, we've noticed that we seem to be afraid of the costliness of restoring people to the Canadian family. We're afraid that somehow it will cost too much in our own lives. This is especially true in times of economic uncertainty. In many ways, as a nation, we've lost our sense that people who are poor and homeless are part of our corporate identity. Sadly, this is often true in churches, government, and society, sometimes even within our own work.

As a follower of Christ, I believe that social justice should be one of the core goals for all of us, including government, and that providing adequate resources and opportunities for our poor lies at the core of this vision. What it takes to put people at the centre, to welcome people of all kinds to the heart of who we are in Canada, without qualification, is really important. Choosing to help only those who “deserve help” and leaving behind those whose barriers we may disapprove of is prejudicial and not biblical.

I'm also standing here today to represent StreetLevel. Salsbury is one of 11 members of StreetLevel, the national round table on poverty and homelessness. StreetLevel is a self-commissioned, self-directing partnership that was created in June 2003. It's composed of experienced leaders of significant Canadian Christian organizations and programs from across the country that work among our nation's poor and homeless. They're dedicated to addressing systemic sociological, economic, cultural, and spiritual defects that contribute to poverty and homelessness in Canada.

We've put forth four proposals for the federal government. I want to focus on two of those proposals today in the short time I have.

One proposal is that we believe the time has come for the Government of Canada to establish a national poverty reduction strategy. We appreciate the steps that have been taken by this committee to put forward the motion to Parliament. We believe it needs an array of measures, targets, and timelines that are very concrete. I hope this committee will move that to the next step, and I hope they will see social enterprise as a key aspect of that national poverty reduction strategy.

● (1035)

Secondly, we believe the Government of Canada, in cooperation with the provinces, territories, and indigenous communities, must establish a national housing strategy. We must establish a national housing strategy with clear targets and timelines aimed at ensuring that every resident of Canada has access to housing that is safe, healthy, dignified, and truly affordable. We've seen the difference that housing makes in people's lives. If we don't have housing, I don't see how we're going to be able to reduce poverty in Canada. We're really looking for leadership from our federal government to establish a national housing strategy.

I think Canadians need and want to hear a vision from our federal leaders. We need to hear that the federal government and all parties unanimously believe in creating a legacy of justice for all Canadians. We need to hear this commitment not only in words, but in budgets, programs, and polices that demonstrate this commitment to justice. We need the federal government to engender a sense of solidarity with other levels of government, and other sectors of society, to build a legacy of justice.

We're convinced that addressing issues of poverty and homelessness ought to be a top budgetary and policy priority for the federal government at this time, and we hope you will ensure that this takes place.

Thanks for hearing my submission.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Dickau.

We'll move, as we always do, to the members of Parliament and start with our first round of seven minutes. I'll turn it over to Mr. Savage for the first round.

Mr. Michael Savage: Thank you very much, and thank you all.

A number of you have referenced the resolution that came to the House of Commons last week on the twentieth anniversary of the parliamentary declaration of intent that child poverty should be eliminated by 2000. I think it was an important resolution to bring to the House, and it reflects the work of this committee. If we're going to establish a report that is all the things that it needs to be, and there's lots of advice from people like yourselves who see people and live the experience, and we've got lots of advice from other people who are sort of expert in this area, then it does have to be a meaningful report. It can't only be a declaration that we have to do something. I think we have to make some specific recommendations.

One of the issues that has to be addressed is the issue of taxation. I want to read you something that the Minister of Finance read into the House of Commons, I think around the time of the budget a couple of years ago:

> Every dollar saved from lower interest payments will be returned to Canadians through personal income tax reductions. More money staying in Canadians' pockets, and less money lost to interest payments. That's our Canada.

Mr. Chairman, I hear it at the hockey arena, I hear it at the coffee shops, I hear it from people on the street: "taxes in Canada are way too high". Is that your Canada? Is that what you think? I've got to tell you, we have had some success in reducing taxes over the last number of years, but it hasn't improved the lives of people living in poverty very much, I don't think. So I'd like to ask Stephanie, or perhaps Jean, do you think taxes in Canada are too high?

Ms. Stephanie Manning: I don't think reducing taxes has much effect on people who are earning low incomes, low wages, or on those who don't have any income at all. Reducing taxes really doesn't help them. If you don't have the money to begin with, reducing taxes isn't going to make any difference, because there's no money to tax.

● (1040)

Ms. Jean Swanson: I agree. But people who are poor do pay their landlords' property taxes; they pay GST and PST and things like that. It's not that they don't pay tax. But this whole idea of having to keep lowering taxes is really disastrous to people who have low income, I think.

The other thing that goes with that is that if you increase taxes, you have to increase it on everybody equally, which is not true. I think we have to start looking at people at the upper end who are getting massive increases in wealth and income in proportion to people at the lower end, who are losing, and start hitting them.

I see Ed Broadbent came out with something saying that people who earn over $200,000 should be taxed for child benefits. If you increased their taxes by only a little, it would mean almost $4 billion that could be put into a child benefit. This idea that we have to keep reducing taxes is an extremely dangerous idea, because it undermines the whole basis that we can have a good social, universal thing that promotes solidarity among Canadians, and it moves towards privatization, where low-income people always get the worst end of the stick.

Mr. Michael Savage: Mr. Broadbent was specifically referencing Barack Obama, who has increased taxes on the highest level in order to pay for some of the programs, including health care.

You referenced before, Ms. Swanson, that the average income of the wealthiest share of families with children increased by more than twice as much as did family incomes for the poorest tenth of Canada's population. I just reference that.

The federal government has two reasons so far for not wanting to have an anti-poverty strategy. One is the cost, and I'll get to that. The other reason given was that it was a provincial and territorial jurisdiction. And this is the reason they rejected the UN Universal Periodic Review recommendation that we should have a national anti-poverty strategy. But we know there are specific areas where the federal government can do something. And the provinces that have an anti-poverty strategy are all calling for the federal government to have its own anti-poverty strategy in coordination with them. So I think we definitely need to have an anti-poverty strategy, and we have to look at how we allocate all of our resources.

Mr. Dickau, thank you for your presentation. One of the things I think we've missed in the last number of years is the great work the faith communities do in poverty reduction, some in small ways and some in larger ways. But in my own community, there are churches that do food banks or do clothing. And they don't think of themselves as advocates for poverty reduction; they just think of themselves as living out the word of God as they see it. They don't think they're activists.

It seems to me there are a lot of people across the country who believe in poverty reduction and who would have a lot of influence if they all came together and coordinated with anti-poverty agencies, social agencies, government, faith communities, the police, the schools, hospitals, everybody. I think the role played by faith communities is going to be increasingly important as we go forward.

Mr. Tim Dickau: Yes, I appreciate that.

One of the concerns for us of the privatization of religion in our country is that the social vision for our country, a vision for justice, a right of arrangements and opportunities for everyone, is not talked about as much. And I think one of the roles the federal government can have is to bring that social vision to life.

To get back to your question about tax dollars, a lot of the complaints about tax dollars come when they perceive the federal government does not have a social vision, does not articulate clearly a vision for justice for all Canadians. And when that is articulated clearly and pursued with passion by the government, I think there will be fewer complaints about taxes and that people will be more willing to give their taxes with some sense of hope they will be used well in Canada. I think that really is the role the federal government has to play.

The Chair: That's all the time we have, Mike.

Mr. Martin, seven minutes, please.

Mr. Tony Martin: Thank you very much.

And again, as I did in the last round, I want to apologize on behalf of Libby Davies, who's not here this morning. She wanted to be here, but she is in Ottawa because of other things that are pressing. She wanted me to extend her greetings and apologies. Don Davies was going to be here as well, but he was called back too.

We're coming to the end of what I think has been some really good work by this committee, looking at what we might recommend to the federal government by way of a federal role in a national anti-poverty strategy. The only piece we have left that we have to dig into a bit further—and certainly as a result of listening to some of the presentations today—is the question of aboriginal poverty and how to deal with that. As was mentioned this morning, it's the canary in the mine in terms of how we manage our resources.

I want to say it's nice to see you again, Jean. I appreciated your book of a few years ago on poor-bashing, and I appreciate the work that you continue to do.

A couple of the things I would put on the table for consideration by the committee in terms of a report, keeping in mind that we're looking at the federal role here, are income security, housing, and social inclusion. You mentioned Hugh Segal's calling for a guaranteed annual income or a basic income. There's a lot of movement happening, not only in Canada but also around the world on that, based on the inherent value in every human being. They should have a basic income they can count on at regular intervals.

Maybe you could share with us a few thoughts on these, if you wouldn't mind. I think we know that we need a national housing strategy. We had one. We had the Canada assistance plan that provided some guarantee of income to people, and that's gone. There's a newly evolving social enterprise sector happening, more aggressively in other parts of the world and in Quebec, but not in the rest of Canada.

Perhaps we could start with you, Jean.

● (1045)

Ms. Jean Swanson: The housing strategy is absolutely key. It needs to build 20,000 to 30,000 units a year across the country. I think cities can provide the land, but the feds and the province have to do the rest.

On social inclusion, we're having a lot of problems with that phrase on the downtown east side, because it's being used to mean that low-income people should include richer people and be driven out of their community. So I'm really dicey with that term because it can be used to mean whatever the user wants it to mean. But by social inclusion, if you mean including... I don't know what you mean by social inclusion, actually.

In terms of the guaranteed income, we haven't discussed this at our CCAP volunteer meeting, as it's just me now, but I totally agree that everyone should have an adequate income and that's a basic human right. I have absolutely no problem there—everyone should have it. But there are so many versions of guaranteed income out there that to say we want it without saying which version, I think, could be extremely dangerous. For example, a lot of people say they want a guaranteed income to be paid for with a flat tax. A flat tax is extremely regressive. A lot of people say they want a guaranteed income that would simplify the whole array of social programs, as Stephanie said, which in one way would be good. But if people are using that to say everyone gets a $5,000-a-year guaranteed income, and seniors are now getting $16,000 so they get a reduction, that would be a problem. Right?

There's a great report by the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives that goes through the various things you have to look out for with guaranteed income.

Another thing is whether it would be used to force people to work at very cheap wages because they have the supplement and don't need the wage to survive.

You have to look at all those factors before you say you want a guaranteed income. You have to say you want a guaranteed income that is adequate, that is paid for by progressive taxation, that doesn't cause anyone to lose money, and all of these things.

What do you mean by social inclusion?

● (1050)

Mr. Tony Martin: Getting back to what Tim had to say, maybe you can share with us your concept of the social economy and including everybody in the community in various ways.

Mr. Tim Dickau: My positive note of the idea of social inclusion is that people have access to resources and the opportunity to participate, no matter who they are or what barriers or struggles they have. So in our community, that has especially meant people struggling with drug addiction and homelessness, that they are included in our business ventures and in our decision-making as a neighbourhood. I think those are some of the concrete ways of describing social inclusion.

Chief Fred Sampson: Social inclusion almost sounds like a first nations concept. In my community, I was raised by my grandmother and grandfather and they basically told me that as a leader you are only as strong as the weakest person in your community. I think that kind of captures what social inclusion is. In a community, everybody has to be treated and respected the same way.

In regard to the housing, in our community right now we can't build any more homes because we don't have water and we haven't had adequate water for a while. Right now, we run on a reservoir system that provides 70,000 litres of water to our community and yet it takes 80,000 litres of water just to extinguish a house fire. So we're below even the basic needs for water in our community, so we can't build homes. We have 320 members in our band and more than half of them live off the reserve because we don't have any housing. And it's inadequate housing as it is. We've got people all crammed and living together in a house. Some of the houses are extremely old. We have mould problems in our communities. We have leaky roofs in our community and yet there's the perception out there that first nations people get free homes and get the best homes in their communities. It's just not true.

Even to this day there are a lot of my community members who want to come back home, but we cannot build them homes because we don't have adequate water. So certainly housing is a real issue in our community.

The Chair: Thanks, Tony.

We'll move over to Ms. Cadman for seven minutes.

Ms. Dona Cadman: Mr. Sampson, where did you say you're from?

Chief Fred Sampson: I'm a member of the Nicola Tribal Association. My community is right in the Fraser Canyon, just nine kilometres south of where the Thompson and Fraser Rivers meet in Lytton. We're right on the Trans-Canada Highway, yet it's almost as though we live in isolation. We have no high-speed Internet in our community, and yet we have fibre all around us. We've been told by the department and the federal government since the year 2000 that we would have high-speed Internet. We still do not have high-speed Internet in our community. We don't have telehealth.

We don't have high-speed Internet for our children to reach into that big, broad world of education. They go to the high school and they're on dial-up. My son says it takes 45 minutes for him to get online, and he gets 15 minutes computer time. How much is that impacting him, and how much is that restricting aboriginal children in my community to keep them in poverty? These are very real things in my community.

Ms. Dona Cadman: If the government put a ban on fishing salmon for a year or two to build up the stock, to get them healthy again, would the first nations abide by it and cut back on their personal consumption to help the stock rebuild?

Chief Fred Sampson: In reality, our member communities through the Nicola Tribal Association have gone to great lengths to protect the identified stocks when they come through DFO management systems. If they say leave the early Stuart salmon alone... I have not eaten an early Stuart salmon in over ten years. I have not eaten one, because we let them go by. This year we faithfully waited, to protect the early-run chinook, to protect the early Stuarts that were going by. We were told that there were seven million salmon coming back in the mid-summer, so I encouraged all of my community members to leave those fish alone, and they listened—they're very concerned about the salmon resource—only to find out that the mid-summer run had absolutely crashed.

Yet all of the other stocks that were doing well this year are the stocks that did not pass through any fish farms. One plus one does equal two. It is very clear. Why are the Fraser-bound salmon stocks crashing while the other stocks did very well this year? It's because none of those other stocks had to pass through the fish farms. It's simple.

● (1055)

Ms. Dona Cadman: You're saying the fish farms are the ones destroying the stock.

Chief Fred Sampson: They're having a huge impact. I'm not saying it's just the fish farms. Most certainly, global warming is an issue; it plays its role. How much pollution plays a role, I'm not too clear. But certainly there is a direct and very distinct link between fish farms and the migrating wild stocks.

This year's crash directly correlates to a study that was done four years ago, in which they went out with little nets and were catching smolts that were passing through the fish farms. Every one of those smolts had up to 20 sea lice on them. That's death. After four lice, it's death. Yet, they pulled out 100,000 smolts, and every one of them was loaded with lice. The biologist said, “They're all going to die”. Now we see it this year. It was predicted that seven million were supposed to come back; it was absolute devastation.

I think there are some huge things that this provincial or federal government can do in respect to how the fish resource is managed. Siska is running an inland communal commercial fishery. This is something we've been saying for over 30 years: if you want better escapement goals or better management targets, you need to start downsizing the ocean fisheries and moving it into the inland, in small-bite fisheries. You can manage the resource, and it will rebuild.

Ms. Dona Cadman: Thank you.

Mental illness and mental health constitute a very serious issue. I'm sure you deal with this a lot in your profession. I would think that it's more prevalent on the streets than anywhere else, due to the fact that these people do not take their medication or do not have access to medication and just go on a continual cycle.

Is there a way of helping these people? I know they closed down Riverview years ago. Would something like that help people who have mental illnesses? Should they go back to an institution to be cared for?

I don't know. Does anybody have any ideas?

Ms. Jean Swanson: Well, you said “people on the street”. They need housing, folks.

Ms. Dona Cadman: They need housing definitely, but a lot of them have mental illnesses.

Ms. Jean Swanson: Listen, I'm 66 years old. I used to work in the downtown eastside in the seventies. In the seventies there were a lot of people who had mental illness, but it wasn't such a big deal then. Why? Well, in the seventies there were places for these people to go. We didn't fight against homelessness, because there was virtually none.

We have a huge issue with homelessness. There are many mentally ill people who aren't poor, and you don't see them on the streets, because they're in their house. Of course we need supports; of course we need a good mental health system, and it needs improvements, of course. But the absolute, basic thing is that you have to have some housing.

Ms. Stephanie Manning: The housing doesn't need to be centralized in downtown Vancouver and the eastside. One of the problems that's happening now is that it's just being used as a dumping ground for everyone who has a problem, more or less. That's where they're dumping them. It should be in their own communities. Everything shouldn't just be ghettoized down in the downtown eastside, and that's what's happening. There are no services outside of your—

Ms. Dona Cadman: So it's just a drop-off place.

Ms. Jean Swanson: I would disagree with that. We have a bit of a disagreement here on one issue; that is, that we at CCAP strongly believe that current residents of the downtown eastside who want to continue to live there should be allowed to continue there and not be gentrified out.

Ms. Stephanie Manning: We don't disagree; I agree on that.

Ms. Jean Swanson: We've done an extensive community consultation process about the future of the neighbourhood, and the average resident whom we talked to in that consultation process has lived in the community for 17 years. So a lot of people are longtime residents.

Stephanie says she agrees they should stay.

There is a danger now that those people are going to be pushed out, because the hotel rooms are getting really high rents, and that's going to create more homelessness. That's provincial, but what you feds could do is... We need a national housing program.

● (1100)

The Chair: Dona, that's all the time we have, but Tim, why don't you just finish up with a comment?

Mr. Tim Dickau: Maybe, Jean, you can help me on this statistic, if you know it.

Judy Graves, who's a city housing advocate, referred to a study, and I wish I could remember the details of it, of people who had moved from the street into housing. In a year's time, the number of people exhibiting mental illness dropped considerably. So housing is a key in addressing mental illness. Obviously it's not the only factor, but it's a key factor. It just makes common sense that if we're living on the street, trying to function while on the street and have a healthy life is almost impossible.

So that's just key; it's a starting point, I think, for all of this. That's why we need a national housing strategy.

The Chair: Thanks, Tim.

I want to thank all the witnesses for taking time out of your busy schedules to be here today.

I'm going to suspend the meeting, and then we're going to change around so that we get to more witnesses.

Once again, thank you very much.

● _____ (Pause) _____

●

● (1105)

The Chair: We are waiting for one individual, but the bulk of our witnesses are here, so we want to get started.

Daryl, I want to welcome you here today, sir.

As you know, our committee has been going across the country talking to people to get specific ideas on which we can base recommendations to the government. We've certainly heard a lot of great information so far, and we are certainly proud to be here in Vancouver today.

Daryl, thank you very much for being here. I'm going to turn the floor over to you for seven minutes, and then we'll continue to work our way back across.

Mr. Daryl Quantz (Member, Chair of the Policy Committee of the Public Health Association of British Columbia, BC Poverty Reduction Coalition): Thank you so much for having me.

My name is Daryl Quantz. I'm a volunteer board member of the Public Health Association of British Columbia, and I'm also the chair of that association's policy, advocacy, and research committee. I work with the population health team of the Vancouver Coastal Health Authority. It provides support to our service delivery teams and partners to address the social determinants of health. A significant portion of my role is raising awareness of issues, such as poverty, that affect the health of our populations.

Thank you so much for the opportunity to be here today to speak with you.

Today I am representing a group called the British Columbia Poverty Reduction Coalition. The coalition represents over 200 NGOs—health, community, faith, first nations, aboriginal, and civil society groups—that have been advocating for the reduction of poverty in British Columbia. Our coalition believes that there is nothing inevitable about poverty. Our goal is to see the development and successful implementation of a provincial poverty reduction plan, with targets and timelines for eliminating poverty in our province, similar to what has been done in other jurisdictions across the country and internationally. We have developed and sent an open letter to all B.C. political parties outlining these targets and timelines and policy options, which are based on successful poverty reduction work in other jurisdictions.

As a coalition, we feel that accountability is imperative, and we are encouraging this accountability by recommending the appointment of a minister or a cross-ministerial committee that would be responsible for overseeing targets and strategy.

I know that you have heard this question across the country. From a public health perspective, why, as a nation, should we be concerned about poverty, aside from, of course, the social justice argument, which should be considered?

Poverty represents a significant threat to the health of our population and to the sustainability of our health care system. Study after study has identified the negative impact poverty has on our health. In British Columbia, a report prepared recently by the Health Officers Council of B.C., which represents all the medical health officers in our province, showed that population health indicators were consistently poorer for lower-income groups. Life expectancy alone varies by 15 years, depending on the area in which you live in our province. Rates of chronic conditions, such as heart disease, cancer, and diabetes, are consistently higher for low-income groups.

Last year I was pleased to see two significant national reports that shared greater insight into the impact of poverty on our health. In the report entitled *Reducing Gaps in Health: A Focus on Socio-Economic Status in Urban Canada*, medical health officers from urban areas across Canada used socio-economic variables to report on health outcomes. Again, this data revealed higher rates of disease and more use of expensive acute-care services among those in lower socio-economic groups.

In his 2008 report, the chief public health officer of Canada reported on these differences in health outcomes and noted them under the term “health inequities”, a term that is growing in use across the world. In his report, Dr. Butler-Jones noted a variation on a well-known quote, which is that a society is only as healthy as its least healthy members. He emphasized our need to pay attention to the underlying social and economic factors that determine the health of our citizens.

For decades Canada has been seen as an international leader in population health. The Ottawa Charter for Health Promotion continues to be a seminal document across the world for health promotion. We have an opportunity to continue this leadership through decisive action to address poverty in our nation.

As a coalition, we recognize that government alone cannot solve this issue. However, government plays an essential role in leading policy direction and in engaging stakeholders to solve this issue, as we are here to do today.

I have a final comment. As a member of various partnerships and coalitions that are advocating on the poverty issue, it is a continual source of frustration when the issue is diverted away from those who are facing poverty and their stories and conditions and towards arguments about exact measures. The low-income cut-off and the market basket measure were both developed to provide a measure of low-income circumstances in Canada. Like any statistic or measure, they are not perfect. That the numbers may be a little more or less is not a justification for inaction. I would encourage the committee to take leadership in affirming the information and methods we do have available.

I'd just like to close by expressing our coalition's appreciation for the committee's efforts. As a Canadian, it makes me proud that we are not only engaging in this dialogue but are also beginning to move forward as well.

Thank you very much.

● (1110)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Quantz.

We're now going to move to Ms. Montani. She is with First Call: B.C. Child and Youth Advocacy Coalition.

Welcome. You have seven minutes.

Mrs. Adrienne Montani (Provincial Co-ordinator, First Call: B.C. Child and Youth Advocacy Coalition): Thank you.

Thanks again for the opportunity to share our thoughts with you and have a bit of a dialogue after we present.

I want to start with our thank you for the motion you took to the House of Commons on November 24, that the federal government develop an immediate plan to eliminate poverty in Canada. Having that motion passed in the House of Commons confirms that having a plan is an absolutely essential first step. Hopefully future action will lead to setting some targets and timelines so we can see what kind of progress we're making to achieve that resolution. Thanks for that effort.

Nationally, First Call is part of Campaign 2000. We produce the annual B.C. child poverty report card. Additionally, we're part of the B.C. Poverty Reduction Coalition, which Daryl is representing today.

As a child and youth advocacy coalition we are particularly interested in the immediate and long-term effects that growing up in poverty has on children's development and health. I'm sure you're all familiar—and Daryl has referenced some of it—with the mountains of research evidence attesting to the negative impacts of poverty on children and youth, and that the longer and deeper the poverty the greater the threat to their well-being. This obviously makes poverty reduction an urgent issue for all of us.

We do have some specific recommendations for actions that the federal government can take, many of which you've likely heard before. I'll run through them quickly. They are contributing to a substantial increase in the supply of affordable and subsidized housing, which is not new to you; investing significantly in the creation of a system of accessible, high-quality, affordable child care; ensuring that post-secondary education is accessible to those with lower incomes without having to incur a burdensome load of student debt; creating a unified child benefit that combines the Canada child tax benefit, national child benefit supplement, and universal child care benefit, and increasing it to $5,400 per child, per year; restoring and expanding eligibility for employment insurance and increasing benefit levels so that most workers are protected during a temporary loss of wages and receive a benefit they can live on while they look for new employment; and, last, ensuring direct and indirect, meaning contracted, employees of government are paid a living wage. A simple place to start might be reviewing the wage levels of people who clean federal buildings and offices, even if, and especially if, they are employed by a contractor or through a property management firm. We need to be part of the solution in all aspects of government, and we can show leadership there.

Whatever actions the committee eventually recommends, they should be grounded by having agreement about where we want to go and establishing the parameters that tell us we're getting there.

We agree with Campaign 2000's interim target of a 50% reduction in poverty for all Canadians by 2020. But if we are to be faithful to the resolution just passed by the House of Commons, there must be a target date for achieving the full elimination of poverty in Canada as well.

The Poverty Reduction Coalition in B.C. has proposed a more ambitious decrease for our provincial government, to reach 75% reduction in poverty within ten years. They have two additional measures that a federal plan might do well to adopt. One is eliminating deep poverty in two years' time, so ensuring that no one falls below 25%. That level could be negotiated, but let's look at eliminating deep poverty, making sure that people don't fall a certain percentage below the poverty line in a shorter timeframe. The second is making sure that reductions in poverty rates include and have the same benefits for those who are now over-represented in poverty statistics, such as aboriginal people, people with disabilities, single mothers raising children, and recent immigrants. Let's make sure those groups benefit equally as progress is made.

In addition to targets and timelines for reduction in poverty, the plan should also clearly spell out the income thresholds that would guide specific actions—for example, we use the LICO before-tax threshold and ask what minimum hourly wage would be required for a single person working 40 hours a week for a full year to meet that threshold. In Vancouver, that would be $10.80 an hour to bring a single person up to that threshold. Similarly, welfare rates could be set in the LICO after-tax or market-basket measure threshold, taking into account federal tax, child tax benefits, as both thresholds are measures of disposable income.

Speaking of child benefits, the $5,400 recommended by Campaign 2000 is based on the additional income that a lone parent with one child, working full-time, full-year, at $11 an hour would need to reach the poverty line.

● (1115)

So some thought has gone into some of these, and there are some thresholds we can recommend to at least bring people up to a poverty line, if we can agree on one, and we should do so.

We need to move from the almost whimsical way that we seem to set benefit levels and instead use a set of agreed-upon thresholds that will guide government in setting rates. Two of our First Call colleagues have also written about the problems that occur when there are differing thresholds, usually quite low, at which benefits begin to be reduced. They refer to this as the stacking effect. Perhaps you've heard of this. The report “Now You See It, Now You Don't” is available on the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives website. It shows how a low-income two-parent family with two kids faced an effective marginal tax rate of over 100% because of the way in which various benefits were clawed back. Those ranged from the child tax benefit to provincial rental supplements or child care subsidies or even the medical services plan's premium assistance that we have here. Those all start to be clawed back, and that interacts with their earned income at a very low rate, and families, as they start to earn, are sometimes actually worse off than they would be if they had stayed on income assistance.

It may well be that the guaranteed income proposed by Senator Hugh Segal could help address some of these stacking effects, but again it will be critical to establish a threshold that would make such a guarantee adequate. I think Elsie Dean spoke to this earlier.

Those are our suggestions for the committee. I want to thank you again for your work on bringing a resolution to the House of Commons, and thank you for inviting us to appear. We look forward to a discussion with you.

● (1120)

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Montani.

We're now going to move over to Laura Track, from Pivot Legal Society.

Ms. Track, you're a lawyer with this society. We'd be happy to hear your presentation. You have seven minutes.

Ms. Laura Track (Lawyer, Pivot Legal Society): Thank you very much for the opportunity to speak with you today. Pivot Legal Society is a non-profit legal advocacy organization doing work in Vancouver's downtown eastside, which is often referred to as the poorest postal code in Canada.

Homelessness and affordable housing are major concerns for the community we serve at Pivot, but in addition, of course, these issues are felt across the country. I'm here today to speak to what I hope you've heard many, many times already in your travels across the country, about the need for a national housing strategy for Canada. Ensuring passage of the bill that is currently before the House, an act to ensure secure, adequate, accessible and affordable housing for Canadians, is a first step the federal government must take towards solving the crisis of homelessness and underhousing in Canada and addressing the issue of poverty across the country.

There are an estimated 150,000 to 300,000 homeless individuals currently in Canada. In the current global economic slowdown, these numbers are only climbing. With the onset of the recession, 500,000 jobs have been lost and more than 150,000 Canadian households have been evicted from their homes because they couldn't afford to pay their rent. Canada's supply deficit, the gap between the number of new households and the amount of new housing, is growing at a rate of 220,000 households annually. Millions of Canadians live in housing that is overcrowded or otherwise substandard, and disturbingly, single women and lone-parent families headed by women are particularly impacted. A national housing strategy is necessary to stem the devastating impact that homelessness has on those afflicted, to relieve the costly financial strain that Canada's homelessness crisis puts on our health and social services, and to allow Canada to live up to its international obligations.

Canada's previous national housing strategy, which was dismantled in the early 1980s, worked. Following amendments to the National Housing Act in 1973, more than 20,000 social housing units were created each year until the early 1980s. Unfortunately, cutbacks at the federal level and transfer of responsibility to the provinces since have led to the homelessness crisis that we see across the country today.

Annual spending on affordable housing at all levels of government has steadily declined since the early 1990s. A study by Steve Pomeroy, a senior research fellow at the University of Ottawa, found that although provinces have technically complied with federal requirements to reinvest savings from federal subsidy transfers related to social housing programs, most provincial governments have simply reduced their own direct costs and compensated with federal dollars.

Homelessness today is at the worst levels Canada has ever seen. Housing affordability is also hitting a low, with more than four in ten renter households and more than two in ten owner households spending more than 30% of their income on housing. Despite this crisis, federal housing investments are $618.5 million behind what they were back in 1989 after adjustments for population and inflation.

Canada is one of only a few countries in the world without a national housing strategy. This has subjected Canada to considerable negative international scrutiny. In 2006 the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights denounced Canada's homelessness crisis as a national emergency and specifically called on Canada to implement a national strategy for the reduction of our homelessness problem. In 2009 the report of the UN special rapporteur on housing found that Canada is failing its housing obligations and recommended that Canada adopt a comprehensive and coordinated national housing policy based on indivisibility of human rights and the protection of the most vulnerable.

Although allocations in the 2009 federal budget plan to stimulate housing construction were necessary and commendable, little money was spent on actually increasing the affordable housing stock. Construction of new housing is fundamentally necessary to house the over 150,000 people currently homeless in Canada. Furthermore, without a national strategy, Canadians don't know whether the money the federal government is investing in affordable housing is being spent in the most effective way.

Earlier this year the Auditor General of British Columbia released a comprehensive review of the province's homelessness programs. He concluded, “Clear goals and objectives for homelessness and adequate accountability for results remain outstanding.”

The government has not yet established appropriate indicators of success to improve public accountability for results. We found significant activity and resources being applied to homelessness issues, but there is no provincial homelessness plan with clear goals and objectives. When there are no clear goals or performance targets, accountability for results is missing. How will we know we are successful if we have not identified success?

● (1125)

Homelessness is clearly a social problem in Canada that needs to be resolved, and the current economic downturn is an optimal time to address this problem. New affordable housing constructed through a national housing strategy will directly inject money into Canada's construction sector. Moreover, investment into supportive housing for homeless individuals will actually save money on support services and over the long term help many of these individuals gain the stability they need to find permanent employment.

In my print submissions I've gone through a number of research studies that show that investing in affordable housing actually saves money over the long term. The study I'm most familiar with comes out of British Columbia, which showed that addressing homelessness the way we do now, through the courts, jails, police, hospitals, ambulances, costs about $55,000 per homeless person per year. Providing people with the supportive housing that they need would reduce those costs to approximately $37,000 per homeless person per year, for an annual savings for this province of about $33 million. So clearly we cannot afford not to invest in supportive affordable housing.

Finally, a national housing strategy is necessary to enable Canada to meet its international human rights obligations, particularly article 11(1) of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, which explicitly obligates Canada to take appropriate steps to realize everyone's right to adequate housing. We've been repeatedly criticized internationally for not living up to our housing obligations. In the special rapporteur study I've mentioned already, the rapporteur has raised numerous concerns about the negative impact of ongoing federal funding cuts since the 1990s, and in particular the impacts of those cuts on aboriginal people.

The report comments that the practical effect is that very little new aboriginal housing off-reserve has been funded in recent years, even though local studies in cities as diverse as Toronto and Edmonton show that a significant number of people who are homeless are of aboriginal ancestry. Just this year the United Nations Human Rights Council conducted its first universal periodic review of Canada's compliance with its international obligations, including the right to housing. During the periodic review a number of countries raised specific concerns about housing insecurity and homelessness in Canada. The federal government's response to the UPR accepted the UN's recommendations on housing and stated:

> Canada acknowledges that there are challenges and the Government of Canada commits to continuing to explore ways to enhance efforts to address poverty and housing issues, in collaboration with provinces and territories.

The federal government's offer here to collaborate with the provinces and territories on affordable housing can be realized through the establishment of a national housing strategy like the one proposed in Bill C-304. The provincial and territorial governments have been asking the federal government to partner with them in a national housing strategy for more than four years. At a meeting of provincial and territorial housing ministers in 2005, the group made the following statement:

> We all share responsibility for good housing outcomes. Federal, provincial, and territorial governments have a shared commitment in ensuring that their citizens have a decent and secure place to live, and, thereby, can access and contribute to the social and economic life of communities.

The federal government has a responsibility to live up to its housing obligations. Canada must allocate sufficient resources in the 2010 budget and implement a national housing strategy for the reduction of homelessness as called for by the UN Committee on Social, Economic and Cultural Rights with the special rapporteur and is desperately needed by Canada's homeless population.

Thank you for your consideration.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Track.

We're now going to move over to Ms. Keeping, who is the Executive Director and Founder of Vibrant Communities Surrey.

● (1130)

Mrs. Susan Keeping (Executive Director and Founder, Newton Advocacy Group Society, Vibrant Communities Surrey): Actually, I'm a founder of that and also I work with the Newton Advocacy Group Society, and I'm a founding member of that.

I'm glad to see Dona here—I thought I wouldn't recognize anybody—so I'm feeling a little more relaxed.

This is something I haven't done before, so I'll read a little bit from my notes. Some of the information in my written notes has been repeated already here, so I would maybe like to be a little more descriptive of what Vibrant Surrey is and its connection to the national Vibrant Communities.

It's a model of multi-sectoral collaboration that's using and working with all three levels of government, the municipal, provincial, and federal, working with business, working with faith groups, and working with other community service agencies, non-profits, things like that, and individuals in the community. It's a unique model, in that we are looking at innovative ways of solving a problem. We realize that there's not an infinite number of dollars. We're trying to be creative. What we do is actually look at and identify some of the gaps and needs in the community. We discuss it at our table and then people bring to the table what they might be able to contribute. There's a list here of all the wonderful people who are involved with Vibrant Surrey, and I hope you will read it later.

One of the things I wanted to highlight and use as an example is that there is an issue around people who are working and homeless in Surrey. There was a count in 2005. We identified over 100 people—actually, I think it was 136 people—who were identified as day labourers and they were homeless. We started a community discussion. In that discussion, we found it didn't make sense that people could have a job and not have a house. So the Surrey firefighters, the RCMP, we all started talking about what we could bring to the table. Both VanCity and Coast Capital Savings—it's a wonderful model... There are other examples in my written submission of how they have come to the table with funding. There's been matching funding through the municipality, through United Way, and there are a number of projects we were able to put on the table.

With Project Comeback we actually went to the individuals who were experiencing homelessness and we asked them, “What do you want to do? What do you need? Do you want to be paid to go to a training program so you can get a better job?” They clearly said no, they didn't want to do that. They clearly said the only thing that makes them still feel human and normal is the fact that they can work. The fact that they're homeless, they lost their housing... There are multiple reasons about why they lost their housing, but they really wanted to continue working.

We created a program that had services beyond simply the nine-to-five Monday to Friday kind of thing. I know Dona has information. We've talked to Dona about what's happening with Project Comeback, and she's a good supporter of the Newton Advocacy Group Society. But I really want to make it clear that without the connection to Vibrant Surrey and the multi-sectoral model, we wouldn't have been able to be successful.

In the end, Services Canada did fund the program partially. It still brings in about $40,000 a year with private donations, in-kind donations, like workboots. The Surrey firefighters will often donate work gear, food, transportation. It's simply amazing how faith groups will come along and if we have somebody who needs a damage deposit or first month's rent, they will literally pass a hat on Sunday and come up with $300 for a damage deposit. We might have other fundraising we're doing. So we do it person by person.

To date, since 2005, when we started this project, we have helped over 200 people get into housing, stay in the housing, and get better employment. They're no longer day labourers. They're no longer in that vicious cycle of work today, get paid today. I won't go on and on about that, because I'm getting way off my notes here.

One of the things I did want to talk about as well is not only the model of the collaboration and seeing business partners and faith groups and community partners working together to solve the issue, but it is the fact that on a federal level... I wanted to give a little bit of a description here about some of the things that were happening or that I saw happening in the last 20 years. Originally, we had an act governing welfare; it was called the guaranteed available income for need. When it ended, the B.C. provincial government created an employment and assistance program, where we went from legislation that stated benefits were to relieve poverty, suffering, and neglect, to a short-term employment and assistance benefit.

● (1135)

There were some good intentions and ideas. We wanted to get people back to work, and we wanted to break the cycle of dependency. I heard that kind of language. But what ended up happening was that we took financial aid workers and we turned them into employment assistance workers. Where is the social safety net for these most marginalized persons? People were falling through the cracks.

I work on the front lines. I'm very much a grassroots advocate. I myself have been there and done that. I was on income assistance as a single mom leaving an abusive relationship. So I know it. It's what actually has given me the passion to work, over these 20 years, in this kind of environment.

But what happens is that people are falling through the cracks. There was some legislation that I think was called CAP. It was the federal legislation that got dismantled. The responsibilities were given over to the provinces. I caution the federal government when it is making changes. Who is watchdogging the provincial government so that it is not further eroding our system? Years ago, we were all talking about how we knew there would be a homelessness problem today. It's no surprise to me. And it's just getting worse. People are falling through the cracks over and over again.

I have some information here about Surrey, but I won't bore everybody by reading the stats. I want to identify some of the new initiatives that Vibrant Surrey is working on.

For example, the living wage has been mentioned here. We talk to the province, because that's whose jurisdiction it is to manage the living wage and to make changes. How can you, the federal government, influence the provinces to do the things they should be doing—having a poverty-reduction plan, having a better housing plan, or using the funds that have been allocated? What can the federal government do to guide the province or create legislation so that these funds can't be used for something else?

I had an example in here about the family bonus. Somebody mentioned it earlier. The family bonus, in my recollection, was the federal money that was given out to persons to help them deal with child poverty. When it was transferred to the province, the B.C. government deducted that from income assistance. How can an initiative that is supposed to make a difference on a federal level be given to the province? It felt like there was no follow-up.

A group of us got together—not Vibrant Surrey—and we wrote a letter asking what they were going to do with the savings now that they were deducting all the money from people who had children and who were on income assistance. They said they were going to use it for training programs. But it just disappeared. We don't know what happened to that money. It's an outstanding question to this day.

We have other payments. We're looking at the LMDA , the labour market development agreements, in which the employment and assistance funding is transferred to the province. I still remember the first meeting I went to. It was a combination of the provincial leadership and the federal leadership. These were bureaucrats, not the politicians, and they were saying they had all this money in B.C. to do all this work. The federal representative was quick to point out that people had contracts attached to all this money. So it's just an ongoing issue, an ongoing erosion of the little bit of money we have to support people who are homeless, who earn a low income.

There are a couple of things we're working on right now. One is the rent bank. This is just the municipality. We have Coast Capital Savings, Envision, and VanCity all sitting at the table with a couple of non-profit organizations, including the Newton Advocacy Group. This is fully supported by Vibrant Surrey. It is designed to create a fund so that people can get a micro-loan that they can pay back over two years, before they become homeless and have no access to crisis grants or hardship grants. This is brand new. We're going to start rolling out loans in January.

● (1140)

I'm not the researcher, but our researcher showed that in Toronto it was very successful. It's now province-wide. In Calgary they have a momentum rent bank model, and I believe the municipality has now taken over more and more of the actual activity of the rent bank and they have a grant bank there.

Our model is testing out the Calgary model. There is one in the valley in Abbottsford that's testing out the Toronto model and there is an aboriginal one in Prince George. So we're excited to have that go forward.

The Chair: I'll ask you to wrap up if you can, just to leave us with a final thought.

Mrs. Susan Keeping: I hardly followed my notes. I apologize.

The main point that I wanted to bring home and repeat is that in building and growing those partnerships we all have something to contribute. Whether it's a pair of work boots, rain gear, experience, connections, networks, or used furniture, we all have something to contribute. So what can we do to work together with you?

The Chair: Thank you very much.

The challenge we have is that there are so many great things we get to hear, but we're constrained by time. We appreciate everyone doing their best.

I now have Susan Anderson Behn. You're with the Fraser River and Approach Working Group. The floor is yours and you have seven minutes.

Ms. Susan Anderson Behn (Representative, Fraser River and Approach Working Group): I'm going to be fairly quick here.

I'm with Jeff Thomas, who is with the same group, and he's going to speak to the handouts you have. Jeff is a councillor from Snuneymuxw First Nation, and I am the coordinator. I am working for the Vancouver Island first nations on this group.

Just to give you a little background on the group itself, access to food, social, and ceremonial fish is a huge issue in first nations in British Columbia. Certainly everybody from B.C. knows we have not had sockeye returning the way it used to. There's going to be a judicial inquiry, but we have been suffering greatly at the community level because of this in the last couple of years.

Salmon have a four-year cycle. They come home and spawn, and four years later they come back again. If you have a failure in one year, four years later you're going to have a continued failure. So three or four years in a row implies that this is going to be a long-term issue in first nations.

The first real failure was in the summer of 2007. In January 2008 the federal Department of Fisheries and Oceans called together and asked first nations—everybody who used the Fraser River inbound fish—to get together to talk about how to share the very limited number of food fish they could see coming in subsequent years. Out of that working group has come the Fraser River and Approach Working Group, which does have DFO officials in it. We're the Vancouver Island portion of it. There are B.C. interior first nations, the lower Fraser, Vancouver Island, and the marine approach first nations involved in it.

To give you an idea of the scope, there are 203 first nations in British Columbia, some large and some small—more small than large. Of those, 97 are in the Fraser, from Musqueam at the mouth to Uchucklesaht at the headwaters, and between 50 and 60 of them are on Vancouver Island and in the marine approach area. This means that of the 203, something like 150 first nations are largely dependent on Fraser fish. So it's not a small issue. We're just the Vancouver Island portion of it.

I'll just make a couple of points. Our communities really were wealthy communities on the coast. There was commercial fishing available. People made good income from it. It allowed them to continue to live in their traditional locations and still have good income. It didn't used to be a situation where you had to pay any money in order to have the fish that you took home and ate. Fishing was done by community members, by family members. Fish was available and it didn't cost anything.

There's quite a bit of detail in the brief. Basically what we're looking at is that the few people who are left in our communities who are commercially fishing are people who have been able to weather the storm. They are entrepreneurs. They've been able to figure out how to fish five or six different types of fish and stay in the business.

With two or three years like this, their ability to continue to do this fishery is getting more and more limited. We're in the situation where, if you live on a reserve, you've put a good income into your home, but it has no value. You can't sell it to anybody other than to a band member, so you're in an uncomfortable situation where you have no capital that you can take out should you want to move. You have a comfortable house, but you're really kind of stuck with it.

We're now, through FRAWG, trying to find ways to coordinate the acquisition of food fish so that what fish there are can be acquired and distributed at the community level. And the big issue, of course, is that it now costs money and there is no source of money in the Indian Affairs budget or anything like that to provide for those costs.

I would just say that first nations administration have a very limited budget. Where first nations have spent money, it mostly comes out of the social assistance budget, and that in itself is problematic. Just to give you an example, in the community where I work, this year we paid $1,500 and we delivered about 300 food fish to the members of a community of 600 people. Five years ago we were delivering between 4,000 and 6,000 pieces of fish, and that would be normal. We would anticipate that an average household would be eating fish once a week. We are looking at 50 or 60 fish per household. That would have been a normal level of food intake.

● (1145)

That's not traditional. Traditionally, it would be much higher than that. But that's what we've been accommodating and that's what we're not getting now. We can't get that without some kind of level of income.

I would just leave it at that. I will leave it to Jeff to speak to the rest of it. We do have a brief and we have at least three specific questions for you. We're looking to see if we can get some assistance from the committee or some understanding that we need a source of funds, maybe from Health and Welfare or some other federal government agency or provincial government, so that communities can organize and manage and get their own fish when there's low abundance. Next year we might not need it, but definitely it's an issue now.

There are some issues in terms of fish management, where fish are being dumped because they're the wrong stock. We're doing food, social, and ceremonial fish on sockeye, and then if you happen to go on a pink salmon bycatch, we're not allowed to bring it in. It's just thrown away at sea. It's perfectly edible fish. In fact, our community got pinks this year, which was bycatch, because we went up and got it from a commercial fisherman who would otherwise have had to throw it away. So that's an issue.

Then we have an EI issue as well to do with the two kinds of seasonal EI and wage EI.

So I'll leave it at that.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Mr. Thomas, we'll turn it over to you for some concluding remarks.

Mr. Jeff Thomas (Councillor, Snuneymuxw First Nation, Fraser River and Approach Working Group): Good morning. I'm Jeff Thomas, from Snuneymuxw First Nation, which is at Nanaimo just across the Georgia Strait from here. I think Susan has covered most of this, but I want give it to you from my Indian point of view.

Having lived on the coast here for many years and now being involved in this committee trying to get an adequate number of salmon to our members, as Susan was saying earlier, it gets a little more difficult each year. In my younger days, I used to work on the fishing boats as a seine fisherman. I got pushed out of the industry over the years because of the lower numbers of fish each year. A lot of us quit the fishing industry and came back to the beach to look for other types of employment. I've gone from being a seine fisherman to being an insane fisherman because of what I've seen over the years with the decline of our stocks.

It's not only salmon, but it's the halibut, lingcod, crab, and oysters. I guess this decline in stocks is due to overfishing, pollution, urbanization, and industry close to the water and beaches, such as saw mills and pulp mills. This has caused a traumatic change to the way of life we've enjoyed.

I myself am from Nanaimo and I have watched the abundance of my river in Nanaimo, as the river comes right through my reserve. I look back 40 to 50 years to when we had good stocks of spring salmon, cohoe, chum, and pink in that river and contrast that to today, when we even stop our own members from fishing this fish because of conservation. It was hard for us to do that. I'm a council member for our reserve and I've been on council for about 16 years. We've had to take those drastic steps within our own first nation and stop members in the name of conservation, even though the river runs through the reserve.

The difficult part for us in doing such a thing is that in Nanaimo we're signatory to the Douglas Treaties, which means we're able to fish as formerly for sustenance and also to sell, but we haven't done that because of the low numbers of salmon we've had for many years. Even today it's getting more drastic. This past year, there were no salmon that we were able to distribute to our members. The year prior to that, there were four salmon. The year prior to that, there were five salmon. You can see just from those numbers—I think it was nine salmon in three years.

Traditionally we'd go out and hire a seine boat at a cost to our first nation of approximately $50,000 to $70,000 per year. We would do that for our members. We would contract the same boat to go out and get these fish for our members. But with the declining stocks we haven't been able to do that lately.

I have no idea how we can work together with the Department of Fisheries and Oceans to somehow work on the pollution we do have on the beaches. For the longest time we were eating the fish, clams, and oysters, but now the decline of the halibut and lingcod in the Georgia Strait, as I said, has had a serious impact on our ability to bring food fish home to our people.

● (1150)

The two previous speakers, Fred and Susan, as I've said, have covered a lot of this, but it's very crucial to our way of life. Growing up on the river, growing up as a commercial seine fisherman, starting off as a gillnetter with my father in my young days, almost 56 years ago, to where we had even in Nanaimo, my first nation, having 400 commercial little boats to fish, today we have one fisherman still hanging on. I think that fact can be said to exist from Victoria right up to Prince Rupert, where we've had a good industry over the years. And the commercial fishermen, be it seiners, gillnetters, trollers, and all the other type, the herring fishermen, as I said, was a very lucrative industry. I don't know how we can ever get any of these fish back to sustainable levels, to where it can sustain a commercial fishery as well as a food fishery.

As Susan was saying, we're looking for support and to access funds during these low periods that can happen in any type of fishery.

Also, the seiners that are out there now food fishing for us, they're there at a cost to each of our first nations. We were quite lucky in organizing ourselves a while back. We organized about 18 first nations, so we were able to cut our costs. It worked very well, but we haven't done that over the last couple of years because of the low abundance of salmon. We do have that capacity to come up with these organizations within our own first nations to make it more cost-effective, because, as I said, food, social, and ceremonial within our communities means a lot.

As well, down on the coast here, Nanaimo to Victoria, and over on the southern mainland, we also have our winter culture where a lot of our fish are used in our longhouse societies. Like I said, it's tougher for us now because we have to go to Costco or Superstore for the fish to feed our people, something that we've been traditionally doing for the last, I guess, 10,000 or 20,000 years. Even going back a mere 150 years, when we were discovered, all Nanaimo used to be longhouses all along the waterfront. So you can imagine how we used to live off this very sustainable fish. But today it's at a very sad state.

Another thing that angers me a lot—

● (1155)

The Chair: Mr. Thomas, if you could just wrap up, please. Thanks.

Mr. Jeff Thomas: Yes.

Another thing that angers me is the Department of Fisheries and Oceans, when we're food fishing for our people, we're not allowed to keep pinks and other types of fish. Yet we're throwing them back. We're bringing up 20,000 fish in a set. A lot of these pinks, which are probably about five, six pounds, are getting crushed by these bigger fish, and then we're throwing them back. Not all get crushed, but some do, and then we're throwing them back. Those could still be used as some sort of food fish for members.

I could talk a long time about a lot of other things. Social assistance, within my community, is $185 per month for a single person. Housing, a very rich community of Nanaimo... Having owned a lot of land in the Nanaimo area, we're now down to 624 acres, 200 of that on a flood plain. So you can see the housing crisis there within our first nation also.

I'll leave it at that. *Hay ce:pqa*.

The Chair: Thanks, Mr. Thomas.

To the members, because we're going to be a bit over time, I'm going to reduce the rounds to five minutes so we can get through at least one round. I appreciate your staying a bit longer, of course.

I'll turn it over to Mr. Savage for five minutes.

Mr. Michael Savage: Thank you very much.

Thank you, all. It was a very informative panel, and I appreciated your viewpoints.

Ms. Track, you mentioned the universal periodic review and the fact that Canada reluctantly accepted a couple of the recommendations on housing. You'd be aware that in that same review they did not accept a recommendation that we should have a national plan to eliminate poverty, which is a concern.

B.C. doesn't have an anti-poverty plan. B.C. has high rates of child poverty, skyrocketing food bank usage. I know civil society has been encouraging the government. Where does that stand? Mr. Quantz, are we close here?

Mr. Daryl Quantz: I would say no. When the child poverty report card was released last week, again the response seemed to be this argument over the numbers. When we can't even agree on a measure, I'm not sure if we're really close to acknowledging we need a strategic platform.

There are piecemeal individual initiatives, and of course they're necessary, but again, we're calling for a strategic comprehensive plan that would help us move forward.

Adrienne, do you want to comment on that?

● (1200)

Mrs. Adrienne Montani: We do feel our provincial government's in denial on this issue, quibbling about either the measurements or giving us lists of things it's doing, all of which have merit. The numbers are the numbers. We're the worst in the country on child poverty for six years in a row, and we're the worst in the country on poverty in general.

Mr. Michael Savage: I wish you well. I hope that when B.C. does have an anti-poverty plan it's a really serious and robust one. As you know, they vary. A province like Newfoundland and Labrador, with a Progressive Conservative government, has a serious anti-poverty plan. It was the second province in the country to commit to it. It's not a political issue. We have Liberals, we have New Democrats, we have PC governments across the country taking it seriously and others taking it not as seriously. My own province of Nova Scotia has a plan, but it's a very weak plan. I'm hoping the new government of my friend Darrell Dexter from Mr. Martin's party will make it a more robust plan.

Ms. Montani, you mentioned specifically... And I thank you for your recommendations. We're looking for specific recommendations. You talked about a child tax benefit, national child benefit, and the UCCB, the universal child care benefit. It's your idea that the UCCB—and advocates have talked about this since it came in—has to be rolled into one more robust plan that would specifically target families in need.

Mrs. Adrienne Montani: That would be our recommendation. The UCCB, as you know, is perhaps misnamed as a child care benefit. It doesn't create new spaces or buy much child care for parents. There's nothing wrong with a national family benefit or something like that for all families. We like universal programs, but it doesn't do what it said it would do. We think there needs to be better thought. It's very complex for people to keep having different pieces to try to put together an income that's sufficient for them.

Mr. Michael Savage: Thank you for that. That's the kind of specific recommendation we're looking for, for our report.

Ms. Track, you talked about the cost of homelessness. There's more and more discussion of the cost of poverty in general. If you take a look at the investments we could make, whether it's for homelessness specifically—and everybody talks about the need for a national housing strategy—or the cost of poverty versus the cost of not doing something about poverty, whether it's jail costs or whether it's addictions costs for people who have mental health issues that cause problems that could have been dealt with earlier, it seems to me one thing we all need to look at more is the cost of not doing something about poverty, as opposed to looking at the little costs. So much could be significant in investing in social infrastructure that the cost is really of not doing something about poverty, as opposed to making investments.

I know the chair is telling me I'm out of time. If you have a quick comment on that, I'd appreciate it.

Ms. Laura Track: I wholeheartedly agree. Really commit to taking a long view on this issue. You're right to point out there are short-term capital costs to addressing poverty and homelessness that one should consider and the long-term financial savings, and also the lost human potential by allowing homelessness and poverty to exist, and the economic spinoff benefits of addressing it.

Mr. Michael Savage: Thank you all very much. That was a very helpful panel.

The Chair: Thanks, Mike.

We'll move on to Mr. Martin, sir, for five minutes.

Mr. Tony Martin: Thank you for coming this morning, and for your contribution.

As I've done with the first two panels, I extend my apologies on behalf of Libby Davies, who wanted to be here today to ask questions and show her support. She's in Ottawa, as are many other members of the committee who normally travel and are part of this very important work. They have been participating very actively and constructively to try to find something that we could all sign onto in the end and deliver it to the government, and challenge government to act on. We're looking at the federal role in a national anti-poverty strategy, of course in partnership with the provinces, territories, municipalities, first nations, and all the good community efforts that are happening out there.

We've heard a number of things here today that we heard down east in the spring and in Ottawa. Certainly housing is a huge issue. Income security is another huge issue. In terms of trying to figure out how we engage government in actually doing something on some of these things that would be substantial, I like the comment, Darryl, that you quoted from Dr. Butler-Jones: society is only as healthy as its least healthy members.

I was in Finland a few years ago, where there is the concept of social welfare is the welfare of society. If society is well, then it works better for everybody. I think we have to get our heads around that and begin to think in that way.

The other thing we've heard here today that was different, in my experience, is this whole question of our first nations and the impact of the decline of the salmon fishery on your communities. I heard Jean and others, such as Peter Julian, talk about it, but never in the same way that I heard it here this morning. For me, anyway, we'll be bringing that back and hoping that we can get some immediate movement on it.

It's been suggested by some that a guaranteed annual income, a basic income, would be one thing we could put in place that would lift everybody. Are there any thoughts on that?

● (1205)

Mrs. Adrienne Montani: I was reading Senator Segal's arguments in the paper the other day, and he's been advocating that for a long time. I listened in on the earlier panel, so I heard some of Jean Swanson's provisos, things you need to take into account. So I think the idea of a guaranteed annual income a lot of us would support, but the devil is in the details, and we'd have to make sure that it's set, and we'd want to have some input into what is a reasonable threshold, who wins, who loses, and how it is paid for. Those are all key questions.

It's not a bad idea, and certainly replacing a plethora of small programs that some families get and some don't, and some know how to get and some don't, and some work against each other, or get clawed back too early... We really do have a bit of a dog's breakfast of programs now, and they're inadequate, and people are falling through. it's not a bad idea, but it really needs the community's help in putting it together.

Mr. Tony Martin: Another concept that I hear as I read and research and try to figure out what it is we can do that would be effective in Canada is the notion of social inclusion, where all people should be able to participate in their community in the ways we do, and take for granted often. Is this something that you feel should be part of a national anti-poverty strategy?

Susan, you're nodding your head.

Mrs. Susan Keeping: Yes, I agree. I definitely agree. I think there are so many areas when we talk about inclusion, everything from recreation to being able to access a bank account. So I would echo what's already been said: that there are so many great ideas, but we all need to have input and we need to work on them together, because we all have different pieces of the puzzle and different information. We would have to look at the details.

Mrs. Adrienne Montani: I would just quickly comment on the issue of tax credits. We really need to look at that. If you take something simple like access to recreation for young people, the current tax credit doesn't work, because you have to have the money to put up front to get the tax credit. For low-income families, they just can't get their kids into soccer or whatever in the first place, so a tax credit does them no good. So those kinds of solutions really aren't helping those who most need the help.

The Chair: Thanks, Ms. Montani. Thanks, Tony.

We're now going to move to Ms. Cadman for the last five minutes.

Ms. Dona Cadman: Thank you.

I think we could all agree that there's going to have to be a national housing strategy plan set up. I would like to know from you what you think the key components of this would be. Do you have any ideas?

Ms. Laura Track: I'll start.

I think the key components to a national housing plan—I'm not going to prioritize them necessarily—would include collaboration and consultation with communities, with municipal and provincial governments, most definitely with aboriginal communities, and with advocates who are doing the work on the ground and have the experience to help inform what that plan should look like. It should entail—and maybe this is the priority—first and foremost, the construction of new affordable housing. The federal government has invested significant resources this year in renovations, and these are much-needed investments, but to tackle the homelessness crisis in Canada we really need to be building new affordable units, somewhere along the lines of the 20,000 to 30,000 units of social housing we were constructing under the previous national housing strategy.

I recall your question to the last panel. Part of a national housing strategy has to include investment in support services for people dealing with mental illnesses and people dealing with addictions and other barriers in their lives. Providing housing first is an important first step to providing a sort of foundation to allow people to address their other issues, but having care and health services and medical support available to people with other issues is a crucial component of any housing strategy.

● (1210)

Mrs. Susan Keeping: If I can, I would like to make a comment about that. I'm involved with an integrated homelessness partnership table that is run through the province, and at that table we have different ministries. We have Fraser Health Authority. We have mental health. We have B.C. Housing. We have social development. We have a couple of churches. We have some non-profits. It's really experiential, in that we're just seeing what we can do.

We have been placing people in housing. There is an initiative going on for which we had a target, and we have been putting those supports in place so that people can stay in housing. We have found that to be very challenging. I think to date, out of 60 people who were placed, mostly in B.C. Housing, only 30 of them are being successful. We're still trying to unravel the pieces of the puzzle, but we even have the problem of gangs getting in, because you have somebody who's homeless and more vulnerable to becoming engaged in criminal activity or being victimized by crime or someone who's using drugs. So therefore we have a street presence—a gang actually—in one of the local units.

So there are all these challenges. It sounds great, and we want to support it, and we have numerous supports in there. There are a number of agencies trying to do whatever they can. There are volunteers, and we're still working really hard. It's a problem when you have 60 people and only half of them are somewhat successful at this point.

Mrs. Adrienne Montani: If I could also answer your question, you have to make sure that whatever plan is created addresses family units, that it's not all just for single people, because there's a huge need for families, and particularly with immigrant and refugee poverty, a lot of them have large families.

The Chair: I want to thank all the witnesses for being here today. I know that we always pick up something a little bit unique wherever we go, and that's helpful for us to hear that. I know that I appreciate when I hear people talking about everyone being involved. I think sometimes people feel it's not their problem, it's someone else's, or that government will fix it, but I think business has responsibility, and it's great to see faith communities supporting these other initiatives.

As I said, it has been excellent here this morning. Thank you very much for taking the time.

I am going to adjourn the meeting for now, and we'll start again this afternoon. Thank you once again.

The meeting is adjourned.

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