House of Commons
CANADA

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

HUMA • NUMBER 062 • 2nd SESSION • 40th PARLIAMENT

EVIDENCE

Tuesday, December 1, 2009

Chair

Mr. Dean Allison

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

Tuesday, December 1, 2009

● (0835)

[*English*]

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

I want to take a second to welcome our guests here today. I want to thank you very much for taking time out of your busy schedules to be here to talk to us about what's happening in your community, what you've seen that's worked, and what you think the federal government could do a little better on to help what you ladies and gentlemen do on the front lines, which is take care of our most vulnerable.

We have been travelling east and west, but it was felt by the committee members that we should go a little bit farther north. Typically, when we did our employability study a couple of years ago, we did not come up north; we are doing that now, and I want to thank you for the hospitality we've received so far. Once again, I want to thank all of you for being here first thing this morning.

I'm not going to take any more time talking. We're going to go to opening statements.

Julie Ménard, we're going to let you start. You'll have seven minutes. I'll try to flag you when you get close to seven minutes; I won't cut you off, but if you could try to keep your comments to seven minutes, that would be great. In the time remaining, we'll go around the room to the MPs, who will ask questions or perhaps clarify some of the things you have talked about.

I'm going to welcome Julie Ménard from the Food Bank Society of Whitehorse.

Thank you for being here. The floor is yours. You have seven minutes.

Ms. Julie Ménard (Executive Director, Food Bank Society of Whitehorse): For at least ten years in Whitehorse we've been discussing having a food bank service available to the most needy citizens. It was obvious that we needed that kind of service. We opened the doors on April 30 of this year, so it's new. We had the board working on this for over a year before opening day. Before April 2009, I think Whitehorse was the last capital in Canada not having a food bank for its population. It's good news for us, and it's working fine.

I want to give you some numbers on the situation here. Since April we have had 750 clients. They fill out forms to indicate eligibility, and those forms represent 1,470 people. A client could be from one person up to nine persons. We have one household of nine individuals.

The food bank has a staff of one, which is me, and the others helping are volunteers. We have a list of 100 volunteers. The numbers are always increasing, so it's changing fast. We have 50 active volunteers most of the time.

We have a lot of donations every month from around 75 individuals or businesses that donate food or money. We give out around 300 hampers each month to those clients. Not all of the clients come every month; we have a lot of clients who are just passing by Whitehorse, especially during the summer, and they've heard about the food bank. They come and get one bag and continue with their travel.

The population of Whitehorse is approximately 23,000 people. From these numbers it appears that about 5% of the population needs the food bank, but that's not the reality because, as I said, some people are just passing by or are coming from local communities. We're not just serving Whitehorse; we're also serving local communities. People are driving from Mayo to get a bag of food. The need is there, and the need exists across the Yukon.

Anyone can be a client of the food bank if they have proper ID. Right now, they can only have one hamper per month, which represents about three days of food. They have fresh food and canned goods. Depending on the day, we may have extra. Most of the food we give is from donations, but we do buy some things fresh each week to put in the bags.

There has been a need. In the Yukon we have had emergency services available for people who would drop by and get some food to help for the day, but this is the first time....

It's working well, and the goal for the near future is to give two hampers each month to clients to cover at least one week. The long-term goal is that we won't exist at all: we'll close because everything is fine.

Our clients are everyone. They have different backgrounds. Most of our clients are single men on social assistance, but we do have a lot of immigrants, single mothers, first nations, or individuals who have just lost a job. Maybe the car broke down and they can't pay.

● (0840)

I have noticed that a lot of people cannot afford their food because of housing. Rent here is so expensive that most of the time the money goes straight to that. Especially when there is a rise in the rent, we see more people coming in. I also noticed that when school starts, it's hard to pay for all the clothing with winter coming, and school materials are needed as well. When summer is coming, we have a whole new crowd. Next year is going to be our second summer, so we'll see if the trend is the same.

From my observation, what I think the federal government could do is have a national anti-poverty strategy for Canada, with clear and feasible objectives that could be achievable and applicable for all jurisdictions in Canada. Sometimes we create big strategies that are good maybe in Toronto, but they may not work for a small jurisdiction like Whitehorse.

It's hard, because we don't have stats regarding use of shelters or our food resources in Whitehorse or in the Yukon. We don't have any stats at the moment, so it's hard for us. We had to prove that we needed a food bank in Whitehorse, because we didn't have those numbers. All the service providers, mostly in Whitehorse, knew that the need was there, but we didn't have the numbers to prove it.

We also need a national housing strategy that could be part of that national anti-poverty strategy. I also think we should work with national organizations on the root cause of poverty. I think we should think out of the box to create and reinvent the system, which doesn't really work right now.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Ms. Ménard.

We're now going to move to your right. We're going to have Laurie MacFeeters, who is with the Yukon Anti-Poverty Coalition.

Thank you for being here. The floor is yours for seven minutes.

Ms. Laurie MacFeeters (Representative, Yukon Anti-Poverty Coalition): Thank you, Mr. Allison.

Thank you for the opportunity to make a presentation today, and thank you for coming north. It really is important to us not to be forgotten in national tours.

The Yukon Anti-Poverty Coalition's mandate is to facilitate the elimination of poverty in the Yukon through awareness, advocacy, and action. We were formed in 1996, and our more than 130 members have become an action-based team who partner with other community members on issues involving food, shelter, and access to services. Today I want to add our voice to concerns and suggestions that I expect you will hear across the country. I want to give you a bit of a Yukon perspective on our experience with federal initiatives that work and with those that could be better.

I particularly want to speak about process and encourage you to think about two themes that we found very effective in our anti-poverty work here: inter-agency collaboration and user input.

I mention collaboration particularly with respect to housing solutions. The federal government needs to reinvest in social housing programs to ensure that low-income individuals and families have a means of acquiring adequate, safe, and affordable housing. We need a continuum of housing, from shelters through supported living to independent living, with quality facilities available at all levels and with programs to ensure that people are living with dignity and as independently as possible for them.

Canada needs a national housing strategy so that every jurisdiction is working towards the same end. The federal government has been successful in facilitating community collaboration and project funding through the homelessness partnering strategy. We've seen very positive results from inter-agency collaboration with the key players all at the same table. We appreciate the role the federal government played as a catalyst in that example; more funding and a less onerous application process for that program would benefit those living in inadequate housing and those trying to support them.

On user input and the design of programs, it's critical that people living in poverty be asked what the solution would be to their struggles, and we hope your process will include that kind of consultation. In our experience in the Yukon, that kind of consultation has been incredibly useful. I have a small example.

About ten years ago, a focus group was held locally on a Saturday afternoon with mostly single moms on social assistance. One of the issues they were asked about was how a small amount of federal money that was targeted for services to children could be used. A territorial government official was there, and he made a few suggestions. They didn't fly. The group didn't think those ideas were really going to make a difference.

Then the members of the focus group talked about how very hurtful it was that their children couldn't participate in sports or music lessons like their friends, because it was all cost-prohibitive. Because of that conversation and the input of that focus group, the Kids Recreation Fund was established here. There was additional money from the territorial government, businesses, and individuals, and since 1999, over 4,000 children have benefited from the program. It was federal seed money spent in the way the intended beneficiaries wanted it most, and a really successful program was born from that.

I also want to talk about national links and some of the broader pan-Canada issues that we here have an interest in.

The Yukon Anti-Poverty Coalition supports the Dignity for All campaign of Canada Without Poverty. We know you will find comprehensive and well-researched input from them and hope you find it useful. We join with them in encouraging you to recognize poverty as a human rights issue, to develop a federal plan that complements provincial and territorial plans, to ensure enduring federal commitment and accountability for results, and to provide sufficient federal investment to provide social security for all Canadians.

We want to add our voice particularly to suggestions about federal support for persons with disabilities who cannot work and for able persons who could work. In a recent discussion with a senior territorial government official, we heard that over one-third of Yukoners living on social assistance have disabilities. We note that the title of your committee includes the status of persons with disabilities, so we hope you will recommend that the federal government work cooperatively with all regions of the country to facilitate the provision of a consistent nationwide disability pension. We must get persons with disabilities off the welfare rolls while giving them the support they need with dignity.

● (0845)

On the other hand, people who can work need to be provided with incentives and supports to do so. Employment is of primary importance to not being poor. All levels of government should work closely with the private sector to assist Canadians to develop the skills and supports to find meaningful employment, and this may entail rethinking traditional models of employment and organizing labour forces to allow employees to work to their maximum capacity, and not necessarily in traditional 40-hour work weeks.

Finally, employment insurance needs to take seriously the employment realities in the Yukon. Traditional trapping, fishing, woodcutting, and tourism are all seasonal in nature, and that reality needs to be taken into account when decisions are made regarding eligibility for employment insurance.

In conclusion, all of the above will only work through partnerships, which need to be developed and fostered among federal, provincial, territorial, and first nations governments, as well as with non-governmental poverty-serving organizations. We all own the problem, we all share the cost of the problem, we all have a responsibility to solve the problem, and we all have a piece of the answer. The problems will never get satisfactorily solved if we do not devise ways of working more cooperatively and with a very concerted agenda to eliminate poverty in this great and wealthy country of ours.

We have the resources. We have the will. What we do not have are the kinds of partnerships that allow us to forget our respective jurisdictional ownership and operate on a model of joint ownership, mutual respect, and equality in decision-making.

Thank you.

● (0850)

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. MacFeeters.

Now we're going to move to our last witness, Amy Martey, from the Yukon Council on Disability.

Welcome, Amy. The floor is yours for seven minutes.

Ms. Amy Martey (Employer Liaison and Job Coach, Yukon Council on disABILITY): Good morning. Thank you for inviting us. I'm from the Yukon Council on disABILITY. We deal primarily with education and employment as well as advocacy and community education for persons with disabilities. So that will be the group I'm focusing on today.

We're seeing the same trends coming up with regard to housing or lack of affordable housing. In Yukon we have very outdated residential tenancies act, which I believe at this time the NDP will be working on strategically. However, due in part to that, we have a lot of substandard housing where housing is available. Rent will range anywhere from $750 to $1,100 a month for a one-bedroom apartment. That may be with or without utilities.

So we find that a lot of our clients are constantly struggling with housing in addition to any disability issues or barriers to employment they might have. Here are some statistics that are actually from the Yukon Anti-Poverty Coalition. The general rental vacancy rate is 2.6% in Whitehorse, whereas the rental rate for subsidized housing is zero. Based on our observations, it typically takes six months to a year to have clients placed in Whitehorse housing. Even a wait time of one to two months is quite often enough to put somebody into a situation of homelessness.

One thing we're seeing for clients who are recovering from addiction is that they're living in substandard units where they're surrounded by others who are also facing addiction issues. So despite counselling and all the good efforts to get into a recovery stage, they're constantly being pulled back into the old cycle.

According to other organizations—and we've been doing a lot of inter-agency collaboration in the last six months—the number of homeless youth in the 13 to 15 demographic is growing. Through our client base, we see that a lot of these youth have learning disabilities, FASD, or possible mental health issues. Supported housing is a program run by Health and Social Services, and we've actually seen that as a really positive program under which a person with a disability lives in a unit adjacent to a unit that is lived in by the support person. However, there's been a shortage of persons volunteering to rent in this program. So public education and an increase in efforts for this would greatly help our clients.

Social assistance is something that at some point most of our clients will pass through when their EI runs out, when they're no longer eligible for sick benefits. We tend to see that we have a lot of clients on long-term social assistance, because they can never fully get back into the workforce. They have a fear that if they start at a 40-hour-a-week job and their benefits are gone, they may not have enough money for food, housing, medication, and transportation. According to some of our figures, which I worked out with a client, in order to make slightly more than his social assistance a month, he would have to earn $14 an hour for 40 hours a week. This man will never be capable of working that many hours a week without aggravating his current condition, so we need a system to help people work the best they can while at the same time gaining social skills and employment skills.

We see a need for support in transitioning. For a lot of our clients with disabilities, at some grade level, they're streamed out of academic and into a skill-building program. That means they're given a grade 12 pass certificate. That essentially means they've been in school either for 12 full years or until they're 21 years of age. This means that when they finish school, they won't be able to get into post-secondary institutions without a good deal of upgrading. We're finding that a lot of students don't realize this when they're streamed into the programs at 16 or 17 years of age. They're not fully aware of how this is going to affect their future. We have found that for most of the students with learning disabilities, with a little bit of help and some extra support, they could have actually gone through and gotten that grade 12 diploma.

● (0855)

As it is now, the majority of our clients are working at jobs that pay $12 an hour or less, which is a reasonable wage for the rest of Canada but not for the Yukon, considering our high cost of living. The recommendation would be to have more transition planning in the school system. We just last week made some recommendations on transition to the Department of Education. We're hoping those working groups will come forward with some solid recommendations.

There's an acute need for professional support persons in the Yukon. When we refer clients to counselling, we're looking at a three- to six-month wait just to see a mental health counsellor. Typically, when someone gets a support person, we're looking at one to three hours a week of support. Supported independent living workers are also looking at a one- to two-month wait.

For persons with newly acquired disabilities, we see that we're needing special support. We're having a lot of clients who don't know how to navigate the system. This is their first time trying to receive benefits, and they're completely at a loss. In September, our organization actually applied for funding, territorially, for an advocate who would help people navigate the system. We were turned down for the funding because it didn't meet our mandate. In line with that, we also see clients going through workers' compensation and being put off for weeks, months, or years. I've personally seen people with conditions that deteriorate incredibly during that time.

There's also a tendency for persons with disabilities to be in jobs that are low paying or without benefits. The Ontario Ministry of Community and Social Services, in 2006, found that half of working-age adults with disabilities were either unemployed or not in the labour force, and 36% of the majority of persons with disabilities earned under $19,000 a year. I would think that the Yukon statistics are similar. This is because of a number of factors, such as a slow job market and the tendency, as we spoke of, for persons with disabilities to have generally lower education because they are streamed out of academic programs earlier on. We still have many employers who are not willing to accommodate.

We have a stigma around disability that, unfortunately, still exists today. There's difficulty with persons with disabilities moving into higher-paying jobs with more responsibility. That's in part, again, a societal and employer issue. Despite some programs we have through the territorial government, such as the workplace diversity employment program, we find that not all of our clients are eligible for that program or have the skills base or the personality to work in that line of work.

That is all. Thank you for your time.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Ms. Martey.

The MPs will now have seven minutes to ask questions and hear the answers. We're going to start with Mr. Savage.

Mr. Michael Savage (Dartmouth—Cole Harbour, Lib.): Thank you, Chair, and thank you all. Those were very good presentations.

The chair explained a little bit about our committee. We've been working on this for about a year and a half now, going back before the last election. We travelled earlier this year to eastern Canada. We're out here this week.

Normally, there'd be more members, but there was a crisis, which happens about six times a week in Ottawa, that a number of members had to be called back for. They're going to be joining us, we hope, in Yellowknife tomorrow. We were in Vancouver yesterday. This is our week to continue to gather information from people who are working on the ground, as you people are. We'll hopefully add to that people who have the experience of living in poverty, and then we'll try to produce a report that makes some sense.

I'm particularly interested in the situation here for persons with disabilities. A number of you mentioned that. I think all of you referred to that situation. I'm looking at statistics we have that indicate that the average annual welfare income of a person with a disability in the Yukon is $15,000. In Winnipeg it's $9,000. In Edmonton I think it's even less than that. It's not a lot of money. Is there a stronger welfare rate for persons with disabilities here, do you think, than there is in other places? It's relative.

● (0900)

Ms. Amy Martey: I think the way it works is that they're eligible for social assistance, and then on top of that there is a territorial subsidy for people with long-term disabilities.

Mr. Michael Savage: And it doesn't get clawed back?

Ms. Amy Martey: It depends on whether they're working or not. There's a formula. I believe it's somewhere around $5,000 a year that a person can make before starting to lose benefits.

Mr. Michael Savage: Regardless, people with disabilities face incredible challenges that they simply don't have the ability in a lot of cases to overcome. That's just the hand they've been dealt.

One proposal that has received a lot of attention from people in the last little while is the idea of a basic annual income. I'm going to read you something from a report that the Caledon Institute did earlier this year in their presentation to our committee. I'll paraphrase to some extent:

> One...alternative that Caledon has been exploring as part of architectural reform for persons with disabilities is an income-tested basic program that would provide adequate long-term financial support with no time limits for persons with severe disabilities.

This would be “financed and operated by the federal government”, and what they're modelling it on is the combination of OAS and GIS for seniors who live in poverty to take them up to a certain level of income—certainly not significant income, but it has reduced senior poverty rates.

So they're suggesting a basic annual income for persons with disabilities.

The Senate committee of the Government of Canada, who are releasing their report, have adopted the idea of the basic annual income, starting off with persons with disabilities.

Do any of you have thoughts on that issue?

Ms. Laurie MacFeeters: We were saying a pension, but it's really another way of meeting the same end, so that people particularly with permanent disabilities don't have to every month be...it's not quite reapplying, but it almost is, for social assistance. That's not appropriate. It's something that establishes their eligibility, medically or however, indicating that it's permanent and not going to change, and then they would continue to get their indexed pension or whatever it is.

We certainly have issues about the cost of living in the north being more. We have a Yukon seniors' income supplement because OAS/GIS doesn't add up to the same contribution to the real cost of living in the Yukon that it adds up to in other jurisdictions. That of course comes from territorial government funding. There are perhaps ways the feds could be more involved. The tax system is a big opportunity for federal support for things around the cost of living. We have the northern tax benefit. There may be ways not to dump the fact that the cost of living is more in the north all on the territorial government.

Mr. Michael Savage: Absolutely. In terms of housing, I noticed that the average value of an owned dwelling is $230,000 which is pretty high. In Winnipeg, it's $168,000. It's not cheap to have a house here.

Thank you for that.

I think one of the real absurdities of how our social welfare works—and there are a lot of them—is that people who are disabled have to keep on proving that they're still disabled in order to receive the meagre amounts of money they're able to get, which I think doesn't make sense.

Julie, the food banks of Canada last week or two weeks ago released their hunger count. I'm not sure whether you're familiar with it or whether the food bank here is associated with it. It showed that food bank usage in Canada was up 18% overall. But one of the statistics I want to get your view on is that overall, 12% of people using food banks are self-identified first nations, Métis, and Inuit. In the territories it's 91%.

Would that be consistent here?

Ms. Julie Ménard: For sure, most of our clients are first nations, but I never did a count, actually. I'm not quite sure; it's pretty close here to half and half, I'd say. A lot of our clients have the choice to show their ID. Sometimes they don't show their first nations card. I cannot tell whether they are or not, even if sometimes they are visibly first nations. I don't take the stats on that. But it will not be 91%, for sure.

● (0905)

Mr. Michael Savage: Did you mention that new immigrants are significant to this?

Ms. Julie Ménard: Yes, we are starting to have a lot of newcomers. In the last few years, Whitehorse has become a place where immigrants are arriving. They're coming from all around the world straight to Whitehorse, and that's new. Since September, I've seen a couple of people coming through who are obviously just newcomers. One who came just last week was actually from Toronto but was still newly in Canada.

So yes, for sure we have the situation of immigrants starting to show up.

Mr. Michael Savage: Obviously the big issue that this committee is addressing is that we want to produce an anti-poverty plan for the country that starts with a recognition that the federal government has a role to play. It seems somewhat self-evident, but the federal government has indicated—in part through means, i.e., the fact that they say they don't have the money, and more particularly through jurisdiction, in that it's a provincial or territorial responsibility—that they are taking a somewhat hands-off approach, not completely, but that was their response to the United Nations periodic review in June, which recommended that Canada have an anti-poverty plan. I would assume you all believe that the federal government has a big role, particularly where there's a high aboriginal population who are the fiduciary responsibility of the federal government in many ways, and that we should have a robust national anti-poverty plan for Canada.

You have identified a few priorities. Are there any other specific things?

Am I out of time?

The Chair: You may take a couple of minutes.

Mr. Michael Savage: Are there any other specific issues that you think should be part of that plan?

Ms. Amy Martey: As Laurie mentioned, there is in the works a national housing strategy. But also there is a meeting, which I wasn't able to attend.

Maybe she could speak on that.

You weren't there?

On Wednesday, there was a gathering of non-profits from Whitehorse to work on specific housing recommendations. One thing that we've been working on along the sidelines for some time is to have emergency homeless shelters. We have a youth shelter that is up and ready to go, but the funding has not yet come through for basic operational costs. As I mentioned earlier, the youth homeless demographic is one that is growing now and could continue to grow.

The emergency shelter at the Salvation Army is very small, but it's our only one in Whitehorse. We're looking at eight to ten beds. That's something that's an immediate priority for us.

The Chair: Thank you.

Thank you Mr. Savage.

Now I'm going to move over to Mr. Martin from the NDP.

The floor is yours, sir, for seven minutes.

Mr. Tony Martin (Sault Ste. Marie, NDP): Thank you for coming this morning.

We're happy to be here. All of us around the table think it's important that we hear firsthand. Given that our goal is to develop some thinking around the federal role in a national anti-poverty strategy, it's important that we come to places like Whitehorse and here.

As Mike has said, we've been at this now for quite some time, hearing from people, different organizations that speak on behalf of those who advocate, and the poor themselves, and there are some common themes beginning to emerge. We'll table a report, hopefully, to the federal government some time in February/March. It always seems to take a little longer than we would like, but I'd like to make sure that we get it as right as we can when we table it, with a call for action on that. So it's important that we hear from folks like yourselves.

Is what we're thinking reflective of what is needed? Are there things that we're missing? Are there some unique features in this part of Canada?

You spoke of the high cost of living. That's not something that we, who live in the southern part of the country and east, have any real understanding of, unless we come here and see for ourselves. For example, I spent a couple of days in a first nations community on the James Bay coast a few years ago, looking at poverty. They used, as an example, a case of Carnation milk that in Timmins would cost, let's round it off, $25; in Cochrane, where there's better transportation access, it went up about $10; you bring it over by train to Moosonee and it's gone up to some $40; and by the time it gets up to, say, Attawapiskat, it's $65. It's amazing. And yet they get the same levels of social welfare, and at that time that's what most of them were counting on to look after themselves.

That was an eye-opener for me, and it's something that I think we have to keep in mind. We have a big country, challenging geography, and things are different.

The other thing I heard you say this morning was around the issue of EI and the nature of work up here. We've heard that in other places as well, but I'm going to ask you to maybe expand on that a little bit, the nature of work and the importance of having income in between the seasons, for example.

A couple of things that I'm looking at in terms of the report, that we need to talk about in the report and have something specific on, are income security and, as you've all mentioned, housing—this is a huge issue across the country. There is also the issue of social inclusion.

Maybe I'll leave it there and see what you have to say in response.

● (0910)

Ms. Laurie MacFeeters: I have two things I've been making notes to myself about as you were talking.

One relates to statistics and research. You were talking about the cost of food, and there's been some recent work about the market basket, the basic food basket, what it costs and what should be in it, and, since some of the things that are in it aren't even accessible in the north, what the substitutions are. There have been consultations about that, so we're hopeful there will be a realistic basket done to do analysis of the cost of living in the north. That speaks to a lot of research.

I noticed a couple of people looked perplexed when Julie said something about not having statistics. Because of our size, when Statistics Canada does various surveys, we're too small, so the statistics aren't reliable. There aren't statistics on the Yukon or on the north for a lot of things. I see your analyst is nodding, so she's looked at this and seen this.

To work to find ways so that we can get better comparative research, our territorial government statistics branch does some things, but it's very hard to place us nationally the way research is done at the national level, because national research so often doesn't include the north. That's a piece that the federal government legitimately has a role in trying to remedy.

Another thing we were talking about is supports to people and the nature of work. Another piece that's unique in the north that we haven't really touched on, although maybe Amy could say more about it, is FASD, fetal alcohol spectrum disorder. I think everybody acknowledges this is more prevalent in the north than in southern Canada, and it has huge consequences for the lifelong limitations of people with FASD. Granted, it's a spectrum and the limitations vary with people, but there are lifelong limitations that require tremendous amounts of ongoing support; otherwise these people are basically either dead or in the correctional system. So we need a huge recognition of that.

That's a bit of a ramble, but those are the things I've been noting.

Ms. Julie Ménard: Maybe I can add that we need a lot of services for a lot of our clients, all of us, but it's hard here to get the proper staff, to keep them, and sometimes it's because of housing issues or sometimes it's because of the salary not meeting the expenses. A lot of services are coming from non-profits, so we don't have high salaries, even if we're in the north. I know that my salary is lower than that of someone in Ottawa running a food bank, and the cost of living is less. There's all this reality that I think we should consider, the fact that it's hard to get properly trained staff to do the job and to keep them.

● (0915)

The Chair: Thanks, Tony.

I want to jump in there, because one of the things we hear as we cross the country is that there's no official measurement of poverty, whether it's market basket or LICO. You raise a great point, because none of those are kept in the Yukon.

My question to you is this. Based on the cost of living here, etc., is there one measurement that you would favour? If we had to come up with a definition of poverty, would it be looking at a market basket? Obviously, the cost here in the north is considerably more for the same types of wages. In Vancouver yesterday people said, “I wouldn't say a living wage, but certainly a wage that was comparable, that would be helpful, would be $11 per hour.” Quite clearly, that would not be the case here because of the cost of housing, etc.

Have you given any thought to the thought process? We'd like to even maybe make a recommendation that we should be looking at one. I realize neither one may be perfect, but it would be nice to at least have a measurement so that we can then determine if we're making progress or not. We have to measure it somehow.

Have there been any thoughts around market basket measures versus LICOs?

Ms. Laurie MacFeeters: There's been lots of talk.

Are the territorial government people going to talk to you at all? I haven't seen your agenda and I don't know.

They've done a lot of work. It partly speaks to Julie's point that we're so thin on the ground. She's *the* staff person at the food bank. That's singular. For some of this research and background work we don't have the time and we don't get it done. We piggyback on national organizations and look to them for that, and unfortunately try to Yukonize it, and that's very difficult.

Although things like guaranteed annual income and such are great models, and for a whole lot of reasons we support those kinds of models for income, the market basket has a lot more appeal of being adaptable to the situation of the north. We have communities like Old Crow that are fly-in only, and they are very different from Whitehorse. The opportunity to adapt a market basket may make it a better model.

At the Anti-Poverty Coalition I can't remember when we've had specific discussions on that. The last discussion I had was with a guy who worked in the territorial government, but they worry about it in terms of social assistance.

The Chair: Go ahead, Julie.

Ms. Julie Ménard: When I said that the food bank didn't exist, we did have discussions for 10 years in the Yukon, and in fact we've been working on this. The Yukon society is the funder or helper that puts the food bank on. One of the reasons is because the territorial government didn't recognize the poverty in the Yukon, because we have some of the highest salaries. If you take a brief look at the situation, you'll think that everyone here is rich. They all work for the federal or territorial government. That may be, but there's a big part of the population who are non-profit and lower, and that is not in the picture most of the time.

I think we're now trying to put this in front. I think the territorial government noticed it and realized that the food bank is needed there, that there's another part of the population we have to think about.

The Chair: Thank you.

Did you have another comment, Amy?

Ms. Amy Martey: I don't have any statistics to represent this, but again, if somebody were coming into Whitehorse for a day, it would appear that it's a fairly well-off community. But I feel that the middle class here is very small. We have people who are making well over $50,000 a year and then we have the bulk of the population who are one or two paycheques away from being homeless. And that also includes the people who are working within non-profits themselves. You have support workers with an incredibly high burnout rate earning $16 or $17 an hour with a clientele of 50-plus as well. That's another thing to factor into that.

● (0920)

The Chair: Before I turn it over to Ms. Cadman, I have one last question.

On the minimum wage in the Yukon versus what people would make in service industries...I know that in places like Fort McMurray and Edmonton the minimum wage may be $8 or $10, but they're paying people $15 or such to work in restaurants. Is that similar here?

Ms. Julie Ménard: I think the minimum wage is $8 or $10.

Ms. Laurie MacFeeters: I think $10 would be what a clerk in a grocery store is getting.

The Chair: It's maybe not as bad as places like Fort McMurray, where there's all kinds of work. That speaks to what you just talked about, where there's not a lot of middle class, and the working poor are the people working for the not-for-profits and maybe the service industry.

Ms. Julie Ménard: I think all businesses are different, but most of the people I know receive at least $10 to $12.

The Chair: Thanks. I was just curious.

Ms. Cadman, we'll turn it over to you for the last round.

Ms. Dona Cadman (Surrey North, CPC): Thank you very much, ladies, for coming.

I have a few questions.

During your conversation I heard that the main industry here would be the government. Is that right? It's the federal and territorial governments.

Ms. Julie Ménard: And there's tourism.

Ms. Laurie MacFeeters: Federal, territorial, and first nations, because we have self-governing first nations. There was a reference before about the federal role, and most of our first nations are self-governing.

Ms. Dona Cadman: Out of the population of 22,000 in Whitehorse, what would be the aboriginal population?

Ms. Laurie MacFeeters: It's 25% in the whole territory, and it's way less in Whitehorse. But Whitehorse has most of the territory.

Ms. Dona Cadman: It's 25%?

Ms. Laurie MacFeeters: But that's the territory. There are a lot of communities that are 100% aboriginal. The CYFN will have better stats for you.

Ms. Dona Cadman: Okay, good.

What would the addiction rate be here in the north? Is it higher, do you think?

Ms. Julie Ménard: It's hard to tell. I don't have any stats from across Canada, so it's hard. I can just talk about the food bank clients. A lot of my clients have addiction problems, but I cannot give any stats on that. I don't even know if there are stats on that in the Yukon.

Ms. Amy Martey: Among our clients I categorize types of disabilities, and we do include addiction. That would be our fifth-largest category of client, the first being permanent disabilities, the second being mental health, then learning disabilities, multiple disabilities, and then addiction.

Ms. Dona Cadman: How many disabled live in substandard accommodations up here?

Ms. Amy Martey: Our organization doesn't look specifically at a housing questionnaire, because employment and education are our primary focus. The reason we actually applied for an advocate, or one of the largest reasons, was because people kept coming to us and saying, “I can't work. I don't have a place to live. I'm getting evicted.” They would be trying to get up for work in the morning and they would have an all-night party happening in their substandard housing unit. It's very difficult for people to be employed when they don't have facilities to shower. There are a lot of issues around that.

In terms of exact statistics, again, I don't have a number, but YTG may be better in that aspect.

Ms. Dona Cadman: Thanks.

I think we all agree that there should be a national housing strategy. Do you think there should be a separate housing strategy for first nations people living off reserve?

● (0925)

Ms. Laurie MacFeeters: CYFN would be in a better position to answer that. It's not the right concept for here. We don't really have reserves. CYFN is the better group to talk to about that. The way our first nations have self-government, the issue of reserve lands and a lot of that is very different in the Yukon from other places in the country, so they can give you the full context.

Ms. Dona Cadman: Okay, thanks.

The Chair: Yes, go ahead.

Mr. Michael Savage: We didn't touch very much on child care. You mentioned Canada Without Poverty, Dignity for All, Campaign 2000. Lots of the organizations nationally that are working on poverty specifically reference the need for robust national, high-quality, accessible, affordable, early learning and child care.

Can somebody just talk briefly on that?

Ms. Julie Ménard: I don't really know the system, how it works here. I don't think I can talk on that, really.

Mr. Michael Savage: Laurie, do you have a view on that? Is it part of your anti-poverty plan or an idea that we should...?

Ms. Laurie MacFeeters: It's theoretically part of the mandate, but our focus at the moment is more particularly on housing and some on health. We used to focus a lot on food and then kind of spun the food bank off to be its own organization. There is a child care organization that advocates quite well for caregivers here, but I don't know if they're appearing before you.

Mr. Michael Savage: Have we seen this?

Ms. Laurie MacFeeters: The territory has a pretty good, but not perfect, system of subsidy for spaces. It is, I think, better than some other jurisdictions where the number of subsidized spaces, as I understand it, isn't limited in the way they sometimes are in other places. The subsidy ties to the person as opposed to the space. So that sort of thing is better.

Our child care is different. There is a lot more very small, sort of home-based, small business child care rather than the huge centres that exist in other jurisdictions. So some things are different again in the north. And sure, they have issues, the system is not perfect, but....

Ms. Amy Martey: Perhaps I'll just add to that.

The best source of information for this would probably be the women's groups in Whitehorse, either Les EssentiElles or the Victoria Faulkner Women's Centre. They've been doing quite a bit of work on the national and territorial agenda.

I think right now it's around $700 per child to attend day care for one month. So depending on the income, if you're not subsidized, what I do find is that some clients will choose to not have two people in the family working. If you have two or three children, it's actually more beneficial for one parent to stay at home in terms of having overall income increase.

Mr. Michael Savage: Thank you very much.

The Chair: We want to thank all of our witnesses this morning for being here and giving us some insight into what's happening in Whitehorse. Thank you once again.

I'm going to suspend the meeting as we change our witnesses.

● _____ (Pause) _____

●

● (0935)

The Chair: Welcome back, as we return to deal with the issue of poverty and hear more testimony.

I want to welcome our two witnesses and thank you for taking time from your busy day to talk to us. As mentioned before, we've been looking at the issue of poverty for the last year or so. We've been out east and we've come out west, and it was also suggested that we come north. This is the first time our committee has travelled up here, and we appreciate the hospitality that we've been shown. Again, we appreciate getting a different perspective from what we've heard.

I'll start with Patricia Bacon from the Outreach Van. I hope you will tell us about what your organization does, and also maybe make some recommendations to us as a committee that we can go back and talk to the government about.

Welcome. You have seven minutes for questions and answers. After we hear from both witnesses we'll have questions from the MPs, either to clarify or go a bit deeper into some of the things you're talking about.

Ms. Patricia Bacon (Manager, Outreach Van): Thank you very much. Thanks for inviting me to speak.

I'm Patricia Bacon, and I'm the executive director for Blood Ties Four Directions Centre, as well as one of the contributing managers for the No Fixed Address Outreach Van. I'm hear to talk today specifically about the outreach van.

The No Fixed Address Outreach Van is a collaboration of four agencies that work together to reduce the harmful effects of poverty and substance abuse in Whitehorse. The Outreach Van has been operating since 2001 and currently runs six nights a week in the community. The van provides a number of important services, including food. On a nightly basis it goes out and provides soup and sandwiches and fresh fruit, as well as clothing and basic hygiene supplies. It also provides outreach nursing services, harm reduction education, equipment—such as needle exchange—and counselling support, as well as socks and mittens. To give you an example, on average, the Outreach Van hands out 3,000 pairs of socks per year to marginalized, street-involved populations.

When it comes to the issue of food, in the first six months of this fiscal year, 2009-10, we provided over 5,700 meals, or nutrition—either hot soup or a sandwich—to over 1,200 different people in Whitehorse. This included 800 men, 400 women, 900 first nations, and 300 non-first nations. Included in that group were 97 children, 96 youth, and 205 young adults. So when we look at the issue of food security and hunger around poverty in Whitehorse, it crosses the entire section of the population.

Basic food security continues to be a problem in the north. Many clients rely on the van as one of their few reliable food sources. The van has enough food to meet the basic needs of about 70 people per night. Sometimes the demand is higher and it exceeds what we can provide.

On the issue of shelter and housing, where do our clients live? The majority of our clients accessing the van are living in chaotic, insecure, unstable housing conditions that include substandard rooming hotels and illegal suites. Many of our clients trade sex or drugs for a bed or couch for the night. In summer months, clients tend to camp outdoors; in winter months, they live at emergency shelters, drug houses, and rooming hotels. Obtaining secure, adequate accommodation is one of the most pressing concerns for our van client population.

At the Blood Ties Four Directions centre, one of the agencies that supports and works with the van to put the service on the road, this is also one of the most pressing concerns for our clients who are living with HIV and hepatitis C. They are struggling to find secure, stable housing as well.

That is what poverty looks like in a northern Canadian city. I understand that the HUMA committee is open to recommendations, so we have drafted the following.

Homelessness is a pressing issue in Whitehorse, and the picture of homelessness in the north can be different from that in southern Canada. It can be hidden, with few visibly homeless people. We respectfully ask the HUMA committee to define homelessness broadly, as it has many different presentations in Canada. In the north it is typically experienced as unsafe, inadequate, substandard, couch-surfing, chaotic, unaffordable, and overcrowded. This is what homelessness looks like in the north.

We also respectfully ask the HUMA committee to put forth recommendations and create opportunities for programs that can address the need for a variety of affordable, stable housing options for northerners. We need reasonably subsidized housing that is adequate to meet the higher cost of living in the north, and a variety of subsidized housing options are urgently needed in Whitehorse.

Thank you.

● (0940)

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Bacon.

We'll now move to Mr. Schultz and the Council of Yukon First Nations.

Mr. Schultz, I believe you're the executive director there. Thank you for being here today. We look forward to your presentation. You have seven minutes, sir.

Grand Chief Ed Schultz (Executive Director, Council of Yukon First Nations): *Merci.* Thank you very much.

I'd like to thank members of the standing committee for this opportunity to share some perspectives from a northern point of view, which is unique from our brothers and sisters in the treaty-based nations south of here.

One of the fundamental problems for many groups up here is capacity, or lack thereof, and therefore I apologize in advance that our written submission is not fully complete, but you will be in receipt of it as soon as practicable.

I will take this opportunity, and I thank you once again, to verbalize some points that might be useful in your deliberations and your consideration of what is obviously a very important subject matter for all people.

I am currently the executive director of the Council of Yukon First Nations. The Council of Yukon First Nations was formed in 1973 as an advocacy body on behalf of all first nations in this territory. Since that time it has undergone some evolution. Currently, today, it represents 10 Yukon first nations out of the 14 that are recognized under the modern treaty that's here in the Yukon.

In 1993, after 20-some-odd years of negotiations, our first nations brought forward, in partnership with the federal crown and with the territorial government, a modern land claims treaty agreement, of which you may be aware. It's a comprehensive treaty agreement, unlike those numbered treaties in the provinces. It's one that's comprehensive in its scope, looking at the involvement of first nations people in this territory in almost all the sectors of society, whether it be in education, health, the economy, and so forth.

It has an element that speaks to not only treaty rights, as defined more specifically related to lands, but it also talks about shared governance responsibilities in the delivery of public programs and services under the self-government agreements. That authority can be exercised by these first nations. We now have 11 first nations in the Yukon that are self-governing. By way of an interesting fact, of the 17 self-governing communities in Canada, 11 of them are right here. And we have four more of them just north of us, in Inuvik, Fort McPherson, and Arctic Red. When you start adding those four communities to that lot, you have virtually all the self-governing communities in Canada right here.

We are really viewed by many people, not only here in Canada but around the world, as being really in the forefront of cutting new relationships with contemporary governments and indigenous populations. Of course, it's very exciting but, nonetheless, has some very interesting challenges.

When we look at Canada and how it provides for its aboriginal citizens, a lot of the policies and initiatives that come out of Ottawa are heavily oriented to the treaty-based nations south of us, which constitute the majority of the aboriginal population in this country. And those arrangements, as you know, were framed or brought to bear early in the conceptualization of Canada itself, and as a matter of fact were necessities as a result of the Royal Proclamation of 1763, as well as the 1870 order, when Canada became more on the path of becoming its own nation.

What I would like to share with you are some realities. I'll thumbnail and bullet them as best I can, and try to tie them into some logical order or sense, but our paper will do it much more justice. In any event, I can let you know that in 1973 the social and economic condition of our people was so desperate that it necessitated them coming together. At that time, our nations had a lot of different organizations advocating status Indians and non-status Indians and aboriginal women—they were all fractured—and they pulled together to form the Council of Yukon Indians, with a grievance document that they tabled with Prime Minister Trudeau, and with Mr. Chrétien, who was the Minister of Indian Affairs at the time. That started the modern land claims process in this country. Canada accepted that document as being a basis upon which to start negotiations.

● (0945)

For our people it was desperate. Our people were still involved with a lot of the residential schools activity. The academic achievement levels of first nations students were significantly lower than those of other Canadians and Yukoners. The unemployment rates among our people were more than triple the rate of other Canadians. As well, in terms of our overall well-being, we had, of course, a much more deteriorated health status than other Canadians.

As a matter of fact, when you looked at all the social indicators, without bulleting them all, when you drew a correlation either to Yukoners or to Canadians, there was a huge disparity with first nations people who lived here.

In terms of housing conditions for the people, I remember living on the Whitehorse Indian band reserve here in Whitehorse. It was basically a patched together shack. We had no water, no electricity, and no real infrastructure in the community to support much healthier living. People were in pretty desperate straits, with high rates of alcoholism and drug abuse, rampant crime, as well as all the related social dysfunctions that come with living in abject and desperate poverty.

I recall as a boy having many days with nothing to eat, yet all around us in this territory there was wealth being generated. You have to remember, back when I was a young boy, the base metal boom was still happening here in the Yukon. We had the Faro Mine; we had a whole bunch of big mining activities going on. There were a lot of people who were building nice houses, and when I'd go to school, I could see that other people would have nice clothes and nice vehicles and they would have all the extracurricular things they could do. The idea that struck me, even as a young child, was the difference.

At that time, given the fact that our suicide rates were shooting through the roof and self-destructive behaviour was something that was going unchecked, our nations took it upon themselves to advocate for this modern treaty.

Without getting into details about the treaty, I can say that the main focus of the treaty was not so much to gain power as to be empowered to deal with all these social ills and to try to find ways to stimulate our communities to be healthier in terms of activity, because idle hands make for a lot of problems.

Since 1993, I've been working on implementing these arrangements. What's interesting is that these arrangements are funded through fiscal transfer arrangements, likened to the ones that Canada has with all the provinces and territories. They're five-year fiscal arrangements. They have built-in escalators for a whole bunch of things in terms of population and inflation and all that sort of stuff, very much like the provinces and territories. They're renegotiated every five years for those adjustment factors and all that sort of thing.

What's very clear in the treaty and the commitment by Canada was that there was, first, an affirmation in the treaty by ourselves, as well as by Canada, that we are indeed, as indigenous people, Canadian citizens, without question, and that we will be afforded every right and opportunity as any other Canadian citizen, without question, whether that be in public services, programs, or other types of support.

As we roll this out, what is really interesting for us—and this is where I think it might be interesting to you—is that we are engaged in a lot of activities related to the social condition of our people. But we're finding, as we see programs starting to roll out from Canada, that we have a lot of terminology that is utilized, such as “on-reserve” and “off-reserve” programming. For our circumstances here, it doesn't apply.

For the first part, we have only maybe two or three recognized reserves in the territory. For the most part, many of our communities don't have a reserve at all; they have what was called “land set aside”. Now the majority of our nations that are self-governing have what is called “settlement land”. That settlement land is defined as a tenure equivalent to fee simple, but the key word is “equivalent”; it's not the same. It's equivalent to fee simple in terms of how we could utilize it, but it is not recognized by many federal departments and ministries as being a designation. In other words, they still stick to the on-reserve, off-reserve; either you live on a reserve or you don't live on a reserve.

For our first nations, when it comes to on-reserve programming, our nations just don't qualify. Yet the social conditions that I spoke of earlier, we're still trying to address. We still haven't succeeded in bringing that equilibrium with other Canadians to our people.

● (0950)

We need those tools; we need those instruments that are being afforded other aboriginals and other Canadians across the country. We cannot take something that was so enlightening and good as a modern treaty, that all of our respective political officers and bureaucracies have negotiated over 30 years and have come to an agreement on, and allow it to be a barrier—and to be a barrier to actually trying to address the issues that were outlined in these treaties, all those negative social conditions.

We know that, for example, in all of our first nations, there's a significant urban-rural divide. I call it that in the Whitehorse context, and I'll qualify that because I'm sure people in Vancouver won't understand this—or Montreal or so forth—but there is our own minute urban-rural divide here in the Yukon. Whitehorse is very small in comparison to most communities in Canada, granted, but you compare Whitehorse, with its 20,000 to 21,000 people, versus our rural communities, which have anywhere from 300 to 400 to 500 people. And also in those rural communities the largest majority of the population is aboriginal. There is a difference in what type of infrastructure support is available for local community initiatives and development.

When we look at stimulus packages that are being rolled out, particularly in the north, related to a whole bunch of federal initiatives, we want to make certain that some of the most desperate communities receive some of these stimulus and infrastructure dollars. When you look at the history of this territory, going all the way back to the fur trade with the Russians and the Hudson Bay Company, the gold rush of 1898, the base metal boom of the late 1960s and early 1970s, and the ongoing activity that is happening today, and you look at the wealth that is generated out of this territory, there's no justifiable reason, in our minds, why any community should not have good-quality drinking water. There's just no acceptable reason, when billions of dollars have been generated out of this territory and have been shipped either to shareholders or as royalty payments to the crown or to the territorial government. Why do we still have a problem with people having good-quality drinking water in their communities? There's no justifiable reason for it. This is where we need to put a focus on what the building blocks are for breaking poverty. When we look at our communities, poverty is still a plaguing problem. It's one that holds you down and makes you desperate, and you do desperate things.

When we look at this urban-rural divide, of course, we need the basic elements addressed: drinking water quality, waste water and adequate disposal of waste waters, and so forth. Why is that important? When you look at the critical masses required to do the activities in the communities, small communities can't attract people to work there because we don't have enough adequate housing for people. We don't have enough housing—I know each of our first nations communities has a list as long as your arm of social housing requirements. That's symptomatic of a broader problem, of course. The key word is “social” housing. If people were more financially independent, they wouldn't be on that list; they'd buy their own homes.

When we look at the range of social programs that are being rolled out by Canada, again, the on-reserve/off-reserve issue continues to plague the rollout here in Yukon. We look at business support and entrepreneurial development in our communities and we talk about economic stimulation. If you don't have the fundamental infrastructure to support that—like good-quality drinking water and adequate housing requirements—and to attract the skills in these remote communities to help work on entrepreneurial activities, then it just gets to be a perpetual cycle. There gets to be the ongoing exodus from the rural areas to the urban centres, and that perpetuates itself where people get to a certain skill set here in Whitehorse and then make their way to the Winnipegs and the Torontos and the Vancouvers of the world.

● (0955)

When we look at the north and at the question Canada is faced with, and when we look internationally in relation to sovereignty, the ongoing challenges associated with the climate change issue, and the ongoing anticipation, not only by Canada, but China, Korea, the Far East, the Europeans, about the opening up of the north and accessing new resources, we see there's an opportunity for Canada to try to do it right, in partnership with not only the territorial government but with local and aboriginal communities.

If I had more time I'd talk your ear off, but I recognize I have to share the floor. This is a very complex issue. There's no simple answer to it. I commend you all for dedicating your time and focus on this question.

I think we do have a lot of tools available; they're just not accessible. Your committee could play an instrumental role in helping to turn that around. Our paper, once we provide it to you, will articulate our thoughts and recommendations on that in greater detail.

Merci.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Schultz.

MPs, who have been known to talk a bit, have a hard time in their seven minutes trying to get all their questions and answers done, so there's always frustration on this end as well. We could have more information, but thank you very much for sharing that.

With that in mind, I'm going to turn it over to Mr. Savage. He has seven minutes.

Mr. Michael Savage: Thank you, Chair.

And thank you, Mr. Schultz and Ms. Bacon.

I'm a Liberal MP from Nova Scotia and the human resources critic for the Liberal Party. I've been involved with this poverty study since the inception, along with Mr. Martin, and Mr. Allison, I think, and Mr. Lessard from the Bloc.

We are travelling this week. There would normally be more members, but some were called back to Ottawa. They will be rejoining us in Yellowknife tomorrow.

We often hear that we don't need to study poverty. We know it exists. We know the root causes, and by and large we know that if there's political will we can find solutions. One of the important reasons to get out and see the land is that there are some areas of need you might not know about by sitting in Ottawa.

Yesterday, in Vancouver, for example, we heard a lot about the loss of the Fraser River salmon and the hurt that has caused indigenous peoples in a lot of communities.

Here, the issue of water is one that I don't think most Canadians realize we have. There are areas in Canada where there isn't sufficient drinking water. There's a bit of attention when you hear about Kashechewan or Attawapiskat, places like that. But clearly that is something that has to be addressed in an anti-poverty plan. That is a very basic need. You can't live without clean water.

From what we've heard so far in the Yukon, the homelessness issue seems to be the number one issue—getting that national housing strategy in place that addresses all needs and all communities.

I just want to make one other point. There seems to be a growing gap between the rich and the poor in Canada even though we've had some decent times in the last decade. I'm quoting Campaign 2000:

> Inequality between the rich and poor in Canada has grown more than in any other OECD country during the last decade, with the exception of Germany. For every dollar the average family with children in the poorest 10% of the population had, the family in the highest tenth of the population had almost 12 times as much..... Clearly, the wealth generated during good economic times was not distributed equitably.

Would that be the same in the Yukon? What is your view on that?

● (1000)

Ms. Patricia Bacon: I think, Mr. Savage, you're making a very good point. We do see that there's growing disparity between the haves and the have-nots. We've certainly seen in our work through Blood Ties and the outreach van that the need for just basic, decent housing has continued to grow as opposed to diminish, so what we're seeing is that fewer people are able to access decent, affordable housing.

We do have a number of people in our community who are doing very well, who are successfully working and engaged in work that allows them to buy homes that are working for them. But what we're seeing is that there are more and more people who can't meet that need. It's not just people who are struggling with addictions or substance use, but we're also seeing the same thing for younger people who are trying to go to college or just starting in the workforce. I would imagine you've seen that trend across Canada. There are fewer and fewer people who are able to get out there and make a life for themselves. We definitely see that here as well.

I think that speaks to the issue of overcrowding, as an issue around housing. Again, in the north, you don't necessarily see the person sleeping in doorways or in storefronts. That's not the kind of homelessness we have here—not in the winter, anyway. But we do have a homelessness problem. How we define it and how we want to look at it is really important. I think that's really important work for the committee just to see that.

Grand Chief Ed Schultz: My lens might be somewhat biased by the people who I normally work for, who are indigenous people—I won't presume to answer the question in relation to all Yukoners—but at least from my perspective over the years, yes, there can be a greater spread between those who have and those who have not. I'll give you an example.

Historically, you shouldn't talk about other people, so I'll talk about myself. When we look at the challenges related to poverty—for example, early in life, I dropped out of school to work full time, out of necessity. It wasn't because I didn't want an education or my parents didn't want me to have one. We needed the money. Someone had to make extra money because there were mouths to feed, bills to pay. Sometimes you could find yourself in a situation where you just have to do that.

I was very fortunate in my life as an individual to go back and get some further academic opportunities. But a lot of people don't. So when you look at the root problems of why it's causing this divide and why the margin is getting wider, we look at some of the challenges associated with learner outcomes for aboriginal people, for example. We know there's a huge difference in the outcomes between our people and other Yukoners and other Canadians, which becomes a very strong barrier for people to try to achieve economic self-sufficiency or get meaningful employment. It perpetuates itself. It gets to be a problem.

I would say that the social condition of our people since 1973 certainly has improved. There's no denying that. But we still fall short of being at an equal level with other people on the whole.

● (1005)

Mr. Michael Savage: Can I ask you this? We've heard in many places, and certainly here today, that we need a national housing strategy, and I think that will be part of our report, I can assure you.

It seems we also need a national water strategy. We talk about a national water strategy more and more, but it's usually from the point of view of fresh water and securing fresh water and keeping it from exports. But people like Larry Bagnell, who you would know, who's a colleague and friend of mine, has brought the interest of his community on this specific issue of water to Ottawa. Maybe that's what we need too—a national water strategy, part of which is to make sure that every community in Canada has clean water.

Grand Chief Ed Schultz: I would agree 100%. I was involved with a number of things over the years related to community development. I remember being part of the national rural infrastructure committee as well as the cities and communities initiative under Paul Martin. We looked at a lot of these things, as a group of people from across the country.

There just doesn't seem to be any justifiable reason in Canada why people don't have good-quality basic infrastructure like good drinking water, basic human needs. Considering the wealth that is generated in many of the regions where these communities are, they really don't have good drinking water. There is a community and right next door maybe there's a mine that has generated $450 million in one year or whatever, but what did the local community get out of it?

I'll tell you what they get here, or have historically got. The public purse ends up paying for all the reclamation work and for ongoing remediation that is required to contain the contamination that threatens the water quality, which is already not good enough. They're not only trying to deal with the fact that their water is not good enough; they are also trying to make sure it doesn't get worse.

If we are compelling proponents of major projects in this country to make contributions, then the federal crown plays a big role in whether that can happen or not through its legislation and regulations. In my mind, we should make sure that local communities, regardless of ethnicity, have good-quality infrastructure as a direct benefit of the activity that is happening right next door. Canada has the ability to impose that in many ways.

Mr. Michael Savage: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Savage.

We're going to move to Mr. Martin, for seven minutes, please.

Mr. Tony Martin: Thank you very much.

This was indeed an education here this morning. It seems to me that sometimes when we grapple with these big fundamental issues we can miss the forest for the trees. We look at specific programs we want and need to implement but don't look at the systemic nature of the challenges we are facing.

I would never have believed that in a small compact community like Whitehorse there were the kinds of challenges you have talked about, Pat. In Canada we have a challenge in many parts of the country in terms of population and workforce. We are bringing people from offshore to work in our industries, yet we have all these people wasting away who are full of potential. Where do the people you deal with come from? What are the underlying causes for their arriving where they are?

Ms. Patricia Bacon: For each band and where they come from? Most of them are long-term Yukoners. Some of them are transient. In the summer the demand for our service does go up, and a lot of that is a more transient population. Our core population of people we serve, anywhere from 50 to 70 people a night, are Yukoners who live here year round, many of whom are of aboriginal descent and have lived in the Yukon a long time.

The issues they are dealing with are complex. A number of them are dealing with substance use issues, addictions, as well as mental health issues. Many of our clients are infected with hepatitis C; some with HIV are co-infected as well. You may not know this, but the Yukon has the highest hepatitis C rates in all of Canada. We have twice the national average. Many of our clients are dealing with hepatitis C as well, often from passive injection drug use or behaviours that put them at risk for hepatitis C, such as unsafe tattooing practices and that sort of thing.

Our clients are struggling with a number of issues, including systemic racism, systemic poverty. Many of them are residential school survivors as well who are dealing with complex trauma in their past, so substance use or abuse is in their lives as well as mental health issues. They are really struggling on a number of fronts. The outreach van provides some basic counselling support services for them, some outreach nursing services. For many of our clients, the only health care they will access is the outreach nursing services from the outreach van. They will not go to the hospital for health care. They do not have a physician. For some of our clients, the only health care they get is from the outreach nurse who works on the van twice a week.

● (1010)

Mr. Tony Martin: How are the systems we have in place—education, health care, social programs—failing these people and their families so that many people are falling through the cracks and ending up there?

As far as our aboriginal, indigenous, first nations folks, it's obviously a great start in the land claims process. There seems to be a huge focus now on the north being the new frontier again. We're going to develop it this time by putting the army there to protect it from encroaching superpowers who might want to steal our resources. But we haven't done a very good job of sharing the resources we have in the first place, which we've already harvested to a big degree.

The demographics tell us that the fastest growing sector of our population is our aboriginal people. That's where our future is. That's our potential. They're our workers of tomorrow, our geniuses, researchers, and health care workers, yet we're missing a whole ton of them.

We talk about income security, housing, and social inclusion. They're all nice words and concepts, but when the rubber hits the road, where do we start?

Grand Chief Ed Schultz: Well, I'm glad you asked that question, because it was a failure on my part to mention it in my earlier presentation. So the Creator works in great ways.

In my mind, and in the minds of many of the people I work for, we already have the framework upon which to start invoking this change of attitude and approaches. That's captured in this modern treaty we have with Canada and with the territorial government.

We know that we've already undergone a 10-year review, and right now we're having difficulty in that review process in how we're implementing.... The real wisdom is to look at how we are implementing this arrangement, how we are implementing this partnership. The partnership is framed, as I mentioned before, not just on giving first nations this, that, or anything. It was more than that. It was more about collaborative governance. It's more about collaboration and cooperation and the delivery of public programs and services for the social well-being of indigenous people, but also by extension, if you read that treaty, of other Yukoners and Canadians.

When we look at some of the fundamental problems associated with this, we have, for example, a single-window approach that Canada takes to looking at this picture through the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development. The obligation by Canada on the treaty is with corporate Canada. It's not with Indian Affairs by itself. Indian Affairs doesn't represent all the various aspects of corporate Canada and all the things corporate Canada does. There's Human Resource Development Canada, there's Environment Canada, there's DFO. I don't have to tell you that; you know this already.

We know that historically in our country, in the development of our governance, we very much have stovepiped our institutions and our ministries. What we wanted to bring to bear in this treaty was, let's find a way to move away from that to where we have greater collaboration. Let's work on making sure these local first nations communities have some basic infrastructure, some basic community support, and public programs and services that they can deliver to help start addressing social ills that were caused by colonial practices that happened in the past.

When we look at these reviews, we're looking at some of the federal policy barriers, and there are a number of them. There are too many for me to share with you now, but I'll share them in the written presentation. These are identified barriers, and even acknowledged by many federal representatives as barriers, yet no one is prepared to come forward with a solution to overcome these barriers that prevent Yukon communities from accessing some really good programming that could help them start working on some of the initiatives required to achieve wellness.

I know when I was in Russia in 2000—I was there for two weeks as a guest—I looked at the social condition. We know that Russia came off 90 years of Communism. I was there as a guest and I got to see a lot of things. One of the things I paid close attention to was the social condition of the Russian population. What was interesting to me was the correlation between the indicators of the Russian population and the indigenous population in this country: rampant alcohol and drug abuse, high rates of crime, high rates of suicide, incarceration, etc. If they had taken the word “Russian” out of it and just put “Yukon First Nations” or “Canadian Indians”, I wouldn't have really known the difference. The indicators were the same.

It's obvious that when we as a country adopted the Indian Act and the application and the principles outlined in there in terms of a real social system, it really did a disservice to the Indian people, although that may not have been the original intent of it, but that was the result. It created an air of dependency and it created a system where people were systematically handled from cradle to grave.

This happened, of course, through the life of the Indian Act. We finally shed ourselves of the Indian Act in 1993, as I said, but we're still wrestling with how we now move forward. How do we move forward now? We have these treaties that are in place that provide for the partnerships, that provide for the fiscal arrangements required.

● (1015)

The problem we always have—and I'll just say it—is that DFO as a ministry is not fully cognizant of its responsibilities under this treaty. Environment Canada is not fully aware of what their responsibilities are. Human Resources Canada is not fully cognizant of their responsibilities. It wasn't just Indian Affairs. So corporate Canada in Ottawa has to find a better way to implement these modern treaties. When I look at what the experiment here is—and that's what it's called by some—we have a shot as Canadians at really doing something that's meaningful and purposeful in terms of helping correct some of our history and adjusting the social dynamics to bring about greater equilibrium between indigenous people and other Canadians.

If we can start making inroads in that light, I think other parts of the country would look at that and say, hey, there are some useful tools that maybe we can consider. We recognize that in other parts of this country there are challenges for the local indigenous populations. We need to find innovations. Right here we have the opportunity to do that.

I would really recommend strongly that Canada get on with implementing these treaties, and I would certainly highly recommend to you as a standing committee that if you have the opportunity to look at our treaties, look at what they say. There's a lot there. There's a lot of good stuff there that most Canadians aren't aware of, and when they do become aware of them, particularly parliamentarians.... I used to be in politics and I used to salivate at the mouth when I saw something good. I wanted to do that. I wanted to be a part of that. That would be my recommendation for what we need to do.

● (1020)

The Chair: Thanks, Tony, and thanks, Ed.

We're now going to move to the last questioner for this particular group of witnesses.

Ms. Cadman, you have the floor for seven minutes.

Ms. Dona Cadman: Thank you.

I applaud you for having so many self-governing.... It's amazing. I think we should be looking at you to see how you're doing. You could be a model for us. I know down in the lower mainland of B.C., there are a lot of first nations, and all they do is squabble and fight among themselves. They haven't come to grips yet.

How did you become self-governing? What was your process for that?

Grand Chief Ed Schultz: Originally it was a process of engagement with Canada at the front end. As you know, in 1973, around that time, Canada had introduced the white paper. The white paper was rejected by many aboriginal people across this country as being just an exercise in assimilation, which was not something we wanted to see as a people.

Our people pulled together. At that time we were pretty separated here in the Yukon too. We had the Yukon Association of Non-Status Indians, which represented all the non-status Indians. We had the Yukon Native Brotherhood, which represented all the status Indians. There was the Yukon Aboriginal Women's Council. I can't remember all the names because I was just a boy back then, but they were all quite divisional in their thinking on how to approach it. They all had the same cause that they wanted to champion, to deal with poverty, low education rates, and all that sort of stuff, but the real debate and division was on how to tackle it.

Eventually it got to a point where the engagements had too many different representations. As a consequence, I think, as I read the material, it allowed for the other governments to not be as responsive as they needed to be. When they amalgamated here in the Yukon, they amalgamated with the firm view that they were going to amalgamate based on their historical relationship to each other and not because someone put a geographical boundary at that degree and that latitude to say that they're separated, because that was something imposed upon our people.

We also recognize that the distinction of “status” and “non-status” was something that was also very divisive in our communities. For example, in my family I was a status Indian. My sister wasn't, even though we had the same parents, the same mother and father, because of the application of the act. I was born just before my parents got married, so I became a status Indian. Since my father was of mixed blood and he wasn't status and my mother married him, she lost her status, so then my sister became a non-status.

We knew that was a very divisive issue in our communities, and people started wearing these tags. It wasn't simply an administrative tool any more for the Department of Indian Affairs to distinguish how much money would be rolled out to pay for Indian support; it became a very divisive thing amongst the people. You know, you're not really an Indian, but you are. We learned to get beyond that.

Then we engaged ourselves with Canada, as I mentioned, and as a response to the white paper we tabled *Together Today for Our Children Tomorrow* with Canada, indicating that we wanted to have a different approach to the relationship between our peoples.

You have to remember at that time there was a lot of talk about the Alaska Highway pipeline coming through here. There were a lot of people talking about a lot of big money and a lot of wealth was going to be made. We said, hang on a minute, we missed the fur trade, we missed the gold rush, and we missed the mining boom of the 1960s and 1970s. We're not going to miss this one. As I was saying in my presentation, our communities had better get a benefit from this. Historically, every time there's a major economic stimulus, we get nothing.

In terms of what Canada can do, it's to make sure, particularly because you have a higher jurisdiction in the territories than you do in the provinces, that systems are set up so that local northern communities really get maximum benefit from the things that happen in their own backyard. If we had the proper basic infrastructure in these communities, and I'm not suggesting that it's going to solve all our problems, but it would put us miles ahead of the game if people have healthy environments upon which to try to get wealth.

When your're trying to deal with a plaguing problem...I admit openly, publicly and otherwise, that I've had my challenges with alcoholism and drug abuse in my past, and I know what those challenges are from an individual perspective. When you feel that there's no hope of getting a job or any meaningful role, you have no hope or prospect of doing anything other than shovelling ditches, and this, that, and the other thing, it helps to perpetuate a negativity about yourself.

● (1025)

When you go to get a drink of water and you can taste the minerals in the water, when you can see the open dumping of sewage in freshwater streams, when you can see all kinds of things going on around you and you seem powerless to do anything, that actually reinforces what people are already feeling as a result of that poverty. It helps perpetuate the despair and the hopelessness in it.

If we could get the basic infrastructure, I think it's one of the major building blocks for getting us away from poverty, but that alone in itself is not going to help. I think the feds have to really look at a type of stimulus outside of the grandiose projects. We know about the expanded exploration for oil and gas, the Mackenzie pipeline, the Alaska pipeline, diamonds, off-sea drilling, all those big, big, glory projects, which are fine if they happen. But when you look at local economies, what do you have available? How can you create a sustainable economy that allows the greatest margin of people...?

I had the opportunity to tour the Scandinavian countries in Europe, which have similar geographical terrain, climate, population, and challenges. I think we could learn from other countries. They have some very interesting approaches to local economy stimulation. We're very open-minded here in the Yukon about exploring what those are. I would encourage Canada to explore those things, too.

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

Grand Chief Ed Schultz: That's my fault. I'm long-winded in my answers when I get going.

The Chair: I wanted to finish up with a question to Ms. Bacon again. I'm really appreciative of the kind of work your organization does.

Talk to me about funding. I'm always curious about what local organizations have to endure just to make things happen. Do you get any kind of government funding at all, even municipal? Do you fundraise? Talk to me about your volunteer base and your operational base.

Ms. Patricia Bacon: Thank you for asking.

Blood Ties is one of the organizations that support the outreach van. Blood Ties is funded both territorially and federally. We get AIDS community action program funding, which is under federal funding. We also get hep C strategy dollars.

Speaking of hep C strategy dollars, one of the things I would encourage the committee to look at is to make sure that hep C funding continues over the long term. It has been precarious from year to year. I think the federal government needs to reinforce its commitment to hep C strategy dollars and to funding agencies around it.

That's what the picture looks like for Blood Ties. One of the things that Blood Ties does is contribute staff to work on the outreach van as an “in kind” type of help. The outreach van has four different organizations, all NGOs, who work together to put the van on the road. Those four organizations work in partnership with the territorial government for funding. The outreach van up to 2007 was running on its own without any government funding whatsoever. We were able to put the van on the road for up to two to three nights a week. It was really on a shoestring. It was just organizations contributing staff in kind; it was relying on the donations of the business community and volunteers to put this project on the road. It was hard to maintain, though, so finally we worked in 2007 to negotiate with the territorial government to come on board as a funding partner.

The territorial government helps keep the van on the road. Now, the van is on the road six nights a week; four nights of that is through the support from the territorial government, and two nights a week it would have run anyway through the in kind donations. That's how it is spread out.

It also relies heavily on volunteers to prepare sandwiches and soup and stuff like that, so it's heavily volunteer-driven for the food component as well. And there are donations, for example, of socks and clothing and that kind of thing. The nursing services that are provided two nights a week are completely in kind donations from Kwanlin Dun First Nation, which is a first nation community here.

Without the volunteer, in kind donation of the business community and the other NGOs, it would be a service that couldn't be offered, and it's an essential service in Whitehorse. Unfortunately, it continues to be an essential service; it's very important.

As to funding, definitely there's always a need for a greater commitment to funding. Conversation came up earlier about why we continue to have some problems and why people are falling through the cracks, as Mr. Martin has been asking. I think that at a broader level we need to be more critical about the way we fund programs in Canada and how we address issues. I'm probably shooting myself in the foot here, but I tend to think that when we continue to fund on an issue basis or on a disease model we are missing the mark.

For example, our work at Blood Ties is funded under a hep C and HIV funding envelope; we're funded to address HIV/AIDS and hep C in the Yukon. The problem is that we really need to be funded to address the broadly defined social determinants of health, which go much beyond hep C. I can be giving out all the condoms I want in the rural communities of Yukon, but when we're talking to, say, women in rural communities who are not feeling empowered to negotiate condom use, for a number of reasons that are going on and that are very broad, I can be there saying here's your condom, because that's what I'm funded to do. But nobody is funded to address those broader issues. I think that is one of the real problems in Canada. It's a problem in the north especially, with the smaller populations. We all have our little islands and we're all funded around our disease models or our “one issue” model. We are not addressing the issue in the way it needs to be addressed, and I think we need to be looking at this in a really critical way.

For example, one of the themes coming up all the time is housing. Housing is very important because it's a broad issue. When I talk about needing a variety of subsidized housing models, it's because housing is so integral to so many other aspects of social conditions.

● (1030)

Basic housing is a human right. It has a direct correlation to people's risk of HIV infection; it has a direct correlation to substance use and abuse; it has a direct correlation to risk of hep C; it has a direct correlation to an ability to work through and resolve trauma and to move forward and to feel empowered and to feel that you have a status in your community. We need to be looking at it at a much higher level. Those are challenges that need to be faced at the federal level, and they need to filter down. I think we need to stop necessarily funding on a disease model and look more at how we empower organizations, NGOs, and other governments territorially and municipally to address the broader social determinants of health that can effect real change and that will have a direct outcome in terms of our seeing a reduction of substance use, of hep C, of HIV, as well as of other problematic issues for people.

The Chair: Michael.

Mr. Michael Savage: We should go for another hour or so, Chair, I think.

There are two things I really want to flag here for our researchers. One is what Patricia is talking about. It's interesting that in our work in international development now, people are starting to realize that you'll have people going in to look at malaria, some to look at HIV, some at tuberculosis, some at sanitation, some at housing. In some cases it's faith-based organizations or NGOs. But we need to strengthen the public health systems of those countries and empower them to make everybody stronger collectively, and we're not doing it in our own country. I think this is really important. I don't know how we address it in the report, but it has to be flagged.

The other thing I want to mention is something that Ed said, which was to make sure that local communities and people get benefit from the economic development in their own backyard. That's something that normally might be the purview of Industry or Finance or Natural Resources, but in looking at anti-poverty, I think this is something this committee has to spend a little bit of time on when we get back and start looking at what we've heard: the whole issue of whether there will be a role, or a recommendation from this committee as to how we do this, in our “alleviation of poverty” piece.

I want to thank you for those contributions.

● (1035)

The Chair: And I'll finish off by saying thank you very much. We realize that you people are on the front lines and are making things happen. From a government point of view, we're trying to see how we can augment and support and strengthen and leverage what you guys do on the ground floor.

So thank you very much for being here today. There has been some great discussion already in the two groups we have had this morning, and we have heard some new things that we hadn't heard, believe it or not. This is always great, because it gives us once again some unique perspective, and that's why we do this.

Thank you once again.

To my colleagues around the room, we have a break until 11 o'clock, if people need to check out or whatever.

We're going to suspend now for half an hour.

● (Pause) ●

● (1100)

The Chair: We'll get going again. It's 11 o'clock.

I want to welcome here Mr. Dougherty. Thank you for being here, sir. And we have Mr. Routledge and Ms. Hrenchuk. Thank you all for taking time to be here.

As some of the members may or may not have told you, we've been doing this study for the last year or so, and we wanted to get out west. Then it was suggested by some of our members that we couldn't go out west without at least trying to get up north. This is the first time for many of us, and we are thankful and grateful for the hospitality we've received since we've been here. It has been an eye-opening experience for us as well, in terms of some of the nuances that are not exactly different. I'm sure you could have told us that, and will tell us that, but just the same, thank you so much for being here.

I'll start with you, Mr. Dougherty, for seven minutes. I believe you're from the social justice committee at Sacred Heart Cathedral.

Mr. Michael Dougherty (Co-Chair, Diocese of Whitehorse, Social Justice Committee at Sacred Heart Cathedral): That's correct.

The Chair: Welcome, and thank you for being here. You have seven minutes.

We'll hear from our witnesses, and then the MPs will take time to ask some questions, to perhaps clarify some of your statements. We're certainly interested in hearing about some of the things you're doing up here, as well as making some recommendations that we can bring back to our government.

Mr. Dougherty, I won't talk any more. I'll turn the floor over to you. You have seven minutes, sir, and I'll make a bit of a hand gesture when you get close to the seven. By all means, you can finish your comments and complete your thought processes.

Mr. Michael Dougherty: The social justice committee at Sacred Heart is part of an emerging network of social justice committees, certainly in this community. Three high schools have social justice committees now, and the United Church, the Anglican, Lutheran, and Roman Catholic churches all have elements of more or less formal social justice activities.

When we were initially set up by Bishop Thomas Lobsinger—he died in a plane crash in 2000, but he established the committee in 1991—he gave us a dual mandate to act locally, but to act globally as well. He saw these two factors as inextricably linked.

That has led us to be instrumental in local initiatives, such as setting up a weekend soup kitchen. For a long time, there was not a place in town on a daily basis where a person who was hungry could securely have a warm meal. The Salvation Army provided five days a week, but nothing on the weekends. In 1992, I think it was, one of our initiatives was the local weekend soup kitchen, which, for over the last 17 years, has literally served tens of thousands of meals to the local hungry in our community. It's done as an organizational model that is very light on its feet. We have volunteers from a wide variety of organizations who take on the responsibility of one Saturday or one Sunday a month, or maybe once every two months. So there's a broad network of people who are engaged in this fundamental need in our community.

At the same time, we've tried to develop active solidarity linkages and relationships with groups like DESMI, which is a socio-economic development organization working with indigenous peoples in Chiapas, Mexico. We've sent people down there, they've sent people up here. We have fundraised for them and they've provided us with certainly the wisdom of their experience working on grassroots development in their area.

Education on both of these fronts has led us to an understanding of the common underpinnings of the problem of poverty and inequality at all levels, from local to international. Networking, as you've heard from others who have made presentations to you before—the anti-poverty coalition and others—is really fairly important in northern communities. In fact, it's essential. It's certainly been part of our efforts here too. We feel that it is a baseline for us to be engaged in broader networks.

We share the analysis of local and global implications of poverty with groups like KAIROS, the Canadian ecumenical church-based social justice movement, which I'm sure you're familiar with. As they note in their mission statement:

> Informed by biblical teaching, KAIROS deliberates on issues of common concern, striving to be a prophetic voice in the public sphere.
>
> Inspired by a vision of God's compassionate justice, KAIROS advocates for social change, amplifying and strengthening the public witness of its members.
>
> Responding to Christ by engaging in social transformation, KAIROS empowers the people of God and is empowered by them to live out our faith in action for justice and peace, joining with those of goodwill in Canada and around the world.

Similarly, we have had speakers up from Make Poverty History—which I'm sure you're aware of as well—and we have engaged in some of their campaigns. As you recall, from their perspective, poverty is a violation of human rights on a massive scale. They have pushed us to support the United Nations millennium development goals and certainly Canada's support for them, where minimum targets are set to reduce poverty, hunger, illiteracy, discrimination against women, and environmental degradation. Just like their goals, which targeted 2015 as the key date, there are other organizations that we've been linked to. For example, Campaign 2000—which you also are aware of, I'm sure—sparked, I think just last week, another motion on the floor of the House of Commons. Both pointed to the fact that we've been woefully remiss in meeting those targets.

● (1105)

But that doesn't deter us, from our perspective, in terms of seeing the linkage between the local and global, and how essential it is for us, if we're addressing local needs, to have before us the global reality as well.

Make Poverty History, of course, cites the need for a shift in national and international policies to eliminate poverty. Here, what they want and what we do as well and what we advocate in our social justice committee, is quite in line with their perspective, calling for more and better international development aid—certainly justice on the trade issue, cancellation of debt, and, like Campaign 2000, calling for an end to child poverty in Canada. These campaigns are mirrored by other organizations you've heard from, I'm sure—Canada Without Poverty and others.

Often there's a real gap between what we hope to achieve and the vision that is offered at the government level. We often hear the rhetoric, but the reality is there's often a fairly large gap between the two. Some of those are just by nature of the structural reality we're in and surrounded by.

One of my first experiences of a government that was presenting a vision of a very different way of structuring the social and economic conditions they were facing was Chile. I had the opportunity, with a student group years ago, to be in Chile during the 1970 election, which brought Salvador Allende and the Popular Unity Party to power. They had a very different perspective that was offering concrete alternatives, making clear choices. The choices they were advocating, in terms of bank reform, land reform, basic restructuring of their society to address the great inequality that exists between rich and poor, were subverted by the international structures they were enmeshed in. So unless we can envision changing those larger structures and truly making them in line with Catholic social teachings, a preferential option for the poor, an option that sees our image of progress we've promoted since the Industrial Revolution as being essentially bankrupt, as our social encyclicals since the turn of the century have said, there can be no progress toward complete development of individuals without a simultaneous development of all humanity in the spirit of solidarity.

I can leave it at that. I had a bit more, but you have my notes as well.

● (1110)

The Chair: Thank you. I hope we'll cover that with some of the questions in the following round.

I want to welcome Don Routledge from the Yukon Housing Corporation.

Mr. Don Routledge (Senior Program Advisor, Yukon Housing Corporation): Thank you very much.

Before I begin, I want to say thank you very much for coming and thank you very much for inviting us. We don't have many opportunities like this. This is very helpful for us.

In the presentation I'm going to give today I'd like to highlight some of the accomplishments our respective governments have achieved in the last couple of years. I'd like to conclude with a couple of areas in which we could improve our working relationship in our programs and maybe give you some ideas to take back to Ottawa.

As the government agency responsible for housing, Yukon Housing Corporation plays a supporting role in addressing homelessness and poverty issues. We contribute by providing social housing to people in need. Affordable housing is an important factor in the fight against poverty. The social housing portfolio managed by Yukon Housing Corporation is approximately 575 units. With current and projected construction, we expect to add an additional net 100 units to our portfolio by the end of 2011.

We are creating employment through the construction and maintenance of our housing stock through Canada's economic action plan and with funding from the Government of Yukon. Our projects are currently providing year-round employment for over 100 Yukoners, which leads to more indirect jobs and benefits the economy.

In 2009, Yukon signed on with Canada, through Canada's economic action plan, for approximately $60 million in economic stimulus funding to build and retrofit social housing. Yukon was the first jurisdiction to fully commit all the funding in the current fiscal year. Yukon Housing Corporation extends its appreciation and gratitude to officials at Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation for its assistance and to the Government of Canada for its financial assistance.

Our Department of Economic Development has calculated that current contracts will create over 100 person-years of direct employment and 22 person-years of indirect employment. With this funding we are already building affordable housing for seniors in the communities of Watson Lake, Teslin, and Faro. In addition, two family housing projects are under way in Whitehorse. With this federal funding we will create approximately 95 new units, and this construction is under way. We will have more social housing and seniors housing starting in 2010.

Over the next two years, Yukon Housing Corporation will be constructing approximately 130 new affordable housing units throughout Yukon. Although some of these units will replace aging housing stock, there will be a net increase to the portfolio of approximately 100 housing units. With these significant investments, both present and future, by Yukon and Canada, the housing corporation's portfolio of 575 units will increase by 100 to 675, which is an overall increase of about 17%. Therefore, together we are helping Yukoners who are most in need.

Previously, through the Canada-Yukon affordable housing initiative, we built a new nine-unit facility to house seniors in the community of Haines Junction. In Whitehorse, we built the athlete's village project, including a 48-unit seniors building and a 24-unit family residence for Yukon College students, as part of the 2007 Canada Winter Games. Altogether, with funding from the Government of Canada and the Government of Yukon, we added 81 units of affordable housing for seniors, college students, and families. With that particular investment, we increased the social housing portfolio by 11%, and we increased the number of affordable housing units for Yukon College by approximately 35%.

While we are making improvements in social housing in Yukon, it is important that we present to this committee an appreciation of some of the major problems the Yukon faces with regard to sustainable funding for affordable housing.

● (1115)

In 1998, Canada and Yukon signed the social housing transfer agreement. This provides Yukon with greater flexibility in the delivery of housing; however, there is a descending funding formula, and by 2029-30, Canada will no longer contribute any funds to the delivery of social housing in Yukon.

The affordable housing initiative is very difficult to implement in Yukon. The current program allows for 50-50 cost-sharing up to a maximum of $75,000 per unit. However, it costs approximately $300,000 to build a new unit in Yukon. Instead of a 50-50 partnership, it becomes a 25-75 relationship, plus Yukon is responsible for all lifetime O and M costs associated with the unit.

Current funding from Canada—be it from the northern housing trust, the affordable housing initiative, or Canada's economic action plan—is limited to simply capital expenditures. Jurisdictions such as Yukon are required to bear the sole financial responsibility for O and M costs, and this is difficult.

Yukon needs a comprehensive and sustainable long-term funding approach with Canada that reflects the cost of construction and the O and M requirements associated with the delivery of affordable housing.

In conclusion, Yukon is doing its best to maximize federal funding, yet a strengthened partnership that is more reflective of the housing needs of Yukoners will better assist in the delivery of affordable housing.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Thank you, Don.

We'll move to Charlotte Hrenchuk from the Yukon Status of Women Council.

Thank you very much for being here today, Charlotte. We'll turn the floor over to you for seven minutes.

Ms. Charlotte Hrenchuk (Coordinator, Yukon Status of Women Council): Thank you.

Before I begin, I would also like to thank you for the opportunity to present to your committee. It's not often that Yukon women have a chance to participate directly in national public consultations.

The situation of women's lives north of 60 is a world apart from that in the south—economically, socially, and culturally. Isolation, a harsh climate, lack of resources, lack of accessible and affordable transportation systems, underdeveloped infrastructure, a high cost of living, a high rate of social problems, limited opportunities for employment and training, and the legacy of residential schools and colonization contribute to poverty and homelessness for Yukon women. These conditions contrive to keep many Yukon women living in the cycle of poverty, with little hope of escape.

Twenty-three per cent of our population is aboriginal, compared to 3.3% for Canada. The legacy of physical, sexual, and emotional abuse of aboriginal women as well as cultural alienation and lack of respect are greater in the north. Consequently, rates of spousal abuse, homicide, and sexual assault are higher for aboriginal women. Aboriginal women live with inequities under the Indian Act and face discrimination daily. These are all social determinants of poverty.

Yukon women are 2.9 times more likely to experience sexual abuse and are more likely to be killed by a spouse. The gap between the families with the lowest and highest incomes, an indication of income inequity, widened during the past decade, with single mothers the most affected. Child poverty is women's poverty, which is increasing in our hostile environment. More women and children are accessing soup kitchens, the food bank, and emergency housing.

The Yukon Status of Women Council released our study of women and homelessness in the Yukon in 2007, which I am submitting to the clerk. The report reveals the determinants and impacts of women's homelessness. Homelessness and poverty are inextricably linked. Homelessness in the north is largely hidden, especially among women. In the Yukon, survival sex is a common way for women to keep a roof over their heads, as is couch-surfing in homes with inappropriate men. At minus 40 degrees, women can't be choosy. We've learned women will get drunk in order to be admitted to detox and can find respite in a women's transition home only after they have been assaulted. We have no emergency shelter dedicated to women and children, and little for youth.

What we've found is that every woman is vulnerable to homelessness and the attendant poverty, given the wrong set of circumstances. Per capita, shelter use is highest in the north. Our housing prices have risen drastically in the past few years. The median rent in Whitehorse in December 2007 increased 3.7% from the previous year, and it increased again by 3.4% in September 2009. The vacancy rate for Whitehorse is 2.6%.

Women and children stay in abusive relationships because there is nowhere else to go. The Department of Indian Affairs social assistance rates have not risen in 10 years and lag behind current territorial rates. Present rates for shelter, food, and the bare necessities leave women caught between paying the rent and feeding themselves and their children.

As in the rest of Canada, lone-parent families headed by women are disproportionately represented among the poor. The situation for aboriginal women is even worse, with 73% of lone-parent mothers living below the low-income cutoff in 2000.

Employment inequities, discrimination, and part-time and seasonal work are the ingredients of poverty and homelessness. We must stop punishing and penalizing women in poverty and help women break the cycle. Poverty forces women to make decisions no one should have to make. Women lose their children to the child welfare system if they do not have adequate housing or cannot afford to feed and clothe them adequately. Disabilities can condemn women and their children to a generational life of poverty.

Poverty is the enemy of sustainable growth. Poverty means more than a low or inadequate income. It means poor health, illiteracy, lack of housing, debt, addiction, deep feelings of despair, and the inability to take advantage of economic growth and opportunity.

Canada needs to address poverty through a gendered human rights lens and assist Canadians to achieve a sustainable livelihood. This would enable all citizens to cope with and recover from stresses and shocks, maintain and enhance their capacities and assets, provide sustainable life opportunities to the next generation, and contribute to the life of their communities.

The following recommendations for the federal government would go far to reducing poverty in Canada and the Yukon. The first recommendation is for a national anti-poverty act based on human rights, sound gender analysis, and sustainable livelihoods, with targeted goals and deadlines. This would assist Canada in fulfilling our obligations to the international treaties that Canada has signed outlining the right to adequate housing and food.

● (1120)

Institute a national housing policy that includes a woman's needs throughout her life cycle, as well increasing funding and support to housing and homelessness initiatives. Require the territory to end the clawback of the national child benefit supplement. Raise and index the social assistance rates of the Department of Indian Affairs. Change employment insurance rules, which put seasonal and part-time workers, mostly women, at a disadvantage. Change the reliance on per-capita-based funding formulas for housing, homelessness, and social program funding to one based on need, which reflects the higher costs of living and building in the north. Involve those living in poverty in creating solutions. And finally, increase support to community organizations working to alleviate poverty, dispel myths about the poor, and change the systems that contrive to keep women trapped in the cycle of poverty, homelessness, and despair.

Thank you.

● (1125)

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Hrenchuk.

We're going to start with Mr. Savage, who's with the Liberal Party. He'll have seven minutes for questions and answers.

Mr. Michael Savage: Thank you very much.

Thank you very much for coming here today.

It's our pleasure, as well as our obligation, to be here and to understand what's happening in this community. It's been very illuminating, at least inside, so far.

I want to start off with Mr. Dougherty. Twenty years ago, when Parliament adopted the goal of eliminating child poverty by 2000, I don't think there were as many faith-based groups involved in that as there are now. It's my experience that there's been a resurgence of the faith-based communities being involved in the issue of poverty. And not just in Canada. You mentioned KAIROS.

If you look at the work of the churches you mentioned here in Whitehorse involved in social justice issues, and if you look at the Catholic Church through Development and Peace, the United Church through the Micah Challenge, the Anglican Church through the Primate's World Relief and Development Fund, and the international effort as well, I think there's a big, big role for faith communities to play.

This is only theory, but based on my experience in my own community—I'm from Nova Scotia—I think for some time there was sort of a sense that faith-based groups almost weren't.... I wouldn't say they weren't welcomed, but they weren't seen as equal partners in the fight against poverty, that they came at it from a faith-based angle that seemed a little bit out of touch with a secular society, which I think we've turned around now.

And I think there's a huge potential. We heard yesterday in Vancouver from a number of church organizations that were doing work that you're doing—interdenominational, multi-denominational poverty groups—and I think there's a big, big role for groups like yours to play. I said at the Social Forum in Calgary that I think one of the keys in getting an anti-poverty plan adopted by the government—not just by this committee but by the government—is people who don't consider themselves activists. People who go to church on Sunday and see it as their obligation to their Creator to actually do something for others don't think of themselves as activists. They do get involved in certain issues—same-sex, for example, and I heard from lots of people who disagreed with my view on civil marriage, and I'd tell them, “Now, get involved politically. Get involved politically in the fight against poverty.” We've seen what it can do through Make Poverty History. And these white bands show that there is a big network. I encourage you to be involved.

Now, I just wonder if you have any thoughts on the specific role of faith-based organizations.

Mr. Michael Dougherty: Certainly there were quite a few more organizations that existed prior to the famous cutbacks of the mid-1990s. We used to have a very well-articulated network of what were called global learner centres across the country, and easily 75% or more of those, once the CIDA funds were cut, evaporated. The same was true for the coalitions. KAIROS is the result of an amalgamation of coalitions. There used to be 13 independent coalitions. PLURA—Presbyterian, Lutheran, United, Roman Catholic, Anglican—was the domestic social arm. Cutbacks over time have forced them to rationalize into one structure, the KAIROS structure. It's been collapsed down rather than expanded out.

Certainly when you look at Yukon history, the first hospital in Yukon was built by the famous Father Judge, a Jesuit priest in Dawson City in the gold rush era. The first schools were church-based. The first emergency relief structures outside of the traditional networks that existed in the first nations communities here were church-related. They played that role consistently over time. The first women's shelter, I think, was probably Maryhouse, which was set up here in 1954. So those were all church-related structures, but they often became disarticulated when they entered into funding relationships with higher governments and that funding was removed.

So you have that yin-yang often of people becoming engaged, establishing organizations, seeking to grow, getting funding, and becoming reliant on that funding, and then that funding is removed and those organizations are reduced or gone. But certainly when you look at it, there has been continually in the Yukon a wellspring of community sentiment such that when there's a family in despair or when there's a disaster of some kind or the ongoing reality of poverty, the generosity of folks is really quite impressive. I've seen it in the annual food drives here, and we'll be beginning Christmas drives soon for folks. Churches often play a part in that, as do other non-governmental members of civic society in general. They range all along the continuum of charity through justice towards solidarity.

● (1130)

Mr. Michael Savage: I think you could mention the Salvation Army as well, particularly with their kettles they're setting up now, which we're going to be seeing.

Mr. Michael Dougherty: Yes.

Mr. Michael Savage: There are a lot of faith-based organizations involved in this.

I'd like to go to Ms. Hrenchuk. Thank you very much for your recommendations. That's what we want. We want some specific recommendations that we can incorporate into a plan.

You talked about a national anti-poverty act that included things like gender analysis, which I think is very important. You mentioned a national housing policy, and that's probably what we've heard the most about across our discussions. You also mentioned the clawback of the child benefit in the Yukon. That's good.

On employment insurance, most of the changes we've seen in EI over the last couple of years largely haven't benefited women. If you look at the extra five weeks as listed in the budget in the spring, that was welcome, but it didn't do anything to increase accessibility for seasonal workers or part-time workers. Ever since we went from it being based on weeks to based on hours, it's been negative for women. So in terms of employment insurance, is there anything specific that you would like? Is it a national standard? Is it a reduced qualifying period? What would it be?

Ms. Charlotte Hrenchuk: I would say it would be both of the things you mentioned, anything that would take into account the seasonal and part-time nature of the work many women do, as well as the nature of women's work across their life cycle. Women start out working full time. Often women will stop working full time when they're staying at home to raise their children. Some women choose that option. Some women chose it because they want to spend that time with their children and their families. Some women choose it because of a lack of availability of child care, which is a problem here as well.

Then when women go to re-enter the workforce when their children are in school—it's a common pattern—it becomes very difficult. During that period of time, women lose a lot of the momentum of their careers, plus they have often sunk into poverty, especially single women if they've had to rely on social assistance.

Mr. Michael Savage: On early learning and child care, I asked somebody earlier and they suggested that somebody like you might be better able to answer this. Is that a need here, as it is in other places, some quality early learning and accessible, affordable, high-quality child care?

Ms. Charlotte Hrenchuk: Definitely.

Mr. Michael Savage: Is my time done?

The Chair: You're almost finished. We'll come back to you afterward.

Mr. Martin.

Mr. Tony Martin: Thank you very much for being here.

We're nearing the end of an exercise of more than two years in trying to get a handle on what the federal role should be in a national anti-poverty strategy, and we're looking at what we might put into a report to government that would cause them to act and put a plan together.

Three of the things that I've talked about and think about in terms of that are supported by some of the testimony we've heard. One is that people are concerned about their income security at all levels, whether it's seniors or single moms or families. Second is housing, which has been mentioned several times here today as a challenge and an issue. Then third, which is fairly new, but I think is something that probably the faith-based communities have recognized over the years, is the notion of social inclusion. I note in the report we got, which was put together by our excellent researchers, that the Yukon has actually announced the development of a new social inclusion strategy.

I was wondering if you—perhaps starting with you, Mike—could talk to me a bit about how that is working. Has it got wheels on it? Is it moving? What's happening there?

● (1135)

Mr. Michael Dougherty: As you are probably becoming aware, in a small jurisdiction such as our own, you meet the people who are involved in the concrete reality of bringing this to life in the checkout at the local supermarket. So you can bypass a lot of the bureaucracy and talk directly to the people. I had the opportunity to talk with Mike McCann, who's leading the effort inside the territorial government for the social inclusion policy. I know he was buttonholed by a speaker who was brought up here, Rob Rainer, from Canada Without Poverty, and was asked to make sure that it's not only the social inclusion policy but it's the anti-poverty policy as well.

But as you have probably heard already, there will be a forum, I hope in February, that will draw together stakeholders, both from the faith-based communities as well as the NGOs and the general public, to talk about the general elements of a social inclusion policy, what that would mean, what it would actually look like. Then a survey will be taking place which the Anti-Poverty Coalition—I'm sure they mentioned that earlier in their testimony—will be engaged in as well, and then a second forum in the fall to sort of concretize this and move it along very quickly.

Before the Anti-Poverty Coalition existed, we had an organization in town called the Collaborators. It was an attempt to break down the barriers between the different government silos, the pockets, and we published one thing early on called “Surviving in Whitehorse”. It was a guide about what the street-level access was for basic services. We always wanted to do a second stage, “Thriving in Whitehorse”, about how with a low income you can enhance the quality of life for people. We never did that. We never pushed on to how we move to the thriving, and that's the real challenge for us in creating a sustainable economy. How do you move away from, in terms of Catholic social teachings, a market-dominated economy to a people-oriented economy, and what does that actually mean in terms of restructuring so that you can provide everyone with the opportunity to thrive rather than only survive?

Mr. Tony Martin: I'm looking at the outline—the juxtaposition to social inclusion, of course, is social exclusion—and it talks about poverty, housing, education, employment, and social participation.

We've heard a lot today about housing and how difficult it is for some to get adequate, affordable housing. The territory is doing some things, and it has taken advantage of some federal programs—although we read yesterday that the recent rollout of social housing money isn't getting out the door very quickly.

Don, you indicated you've taken advantage of all your money in the first year. Having listened to Charlotte describe the challenge for women in finding affordable, appropriate housing, particularly in circumstances where they're being abused and need to leave the house they're in, how do we square that circle, or circle that square?

Mr. Don Routledge: I'd like to make one quick comment. The news article you referenced from yesterday deals with the extension of the affordable housing initiative, which I believe was announced by the Government of Canada last September or October. This is an issue that I discussed in our presentation. The problem for a jurisdiction like Yukon under that initiative—and we have a budget allocation of $1.97 million—is that the cost sharing formula is 50-50, to a maximum contribution by Canada of $75,000, yet it costs $300,000 to build a unit.

When I referenced in my presentation that we have difficulty with some of the well-intended federal initiatives, this is one of them. It means that either an NGO or a private sector developer or the Yukon government has to provide 75%, plus the lifetime O and M costs. It's sometimes not easy for us to roll out a federal initiative. Sometimes we succeed, but other times we have a lot of difficulty.

● (1140)

Mr. Tony Martin: Charlotte, did you want to comment on the housing situation? I think you probably did fairly well in your presentation. I heard some quite positive things from Don on what's going on in terms of housing. I also heard some pretty challenging stuff from you and others who appeared earlier in the day, particularly for those at the lower end and women who are trying to access safe, affordable housing.

Ms. Charlotte Hrenchuk: I think there's a whole spectrum of housing for women that needs to be addressed. Yukon Housing is building an affordable unit that was supposed to be for women and children, but it was extended to single-parent families, including men.

We desperately need accommodation for single women who don't have dependants, who have the lowest rate of social assistance. They often have no family or any kind of fallback system.

We desperately need more housing for women leaving the transition home. There are five units that are always filled, and that's through the whole of the Yukon. Women very often come from rural areas to Whitehorse for safety and shelter. There's basically nothing in the communities. Dawson City and Watson Lake have a shelter, but as it stands now, there are only five units for second-stage housing for the entire Yukon

Kaushee's Place, which is a women's transition home, has a shovel-ready project that has been sent back and forth between the government for more and more tweaking. That's been going on for several years now. There may be many reasons for that, but I don't really comprehend them. I think Yukon Housing does as much as it can given the funding it has.

I'd like to say something about the social inclusion policy. The problem is that it seems to be moving rapidly, which is a good thing, but it is not exactly modelling social inclusion in the way it's rolling it out. It has not included any non-governmental organizations in the design or brainstorming of the ideas so far. I don't think it's modelling social inclusion. I think the inclusion of non-governmental organizations from the very early inception and conception phases would have been a very positive thing. It would have indicated to non-governmental organizations in the Yukon, which provide a lot of resources for people living in poverty.... That would have been a really good move.

The Chair: Thanks, Tony, and thanks, Ms. Hrenchuk.

We're going to move over to Ms. Cadman for seven minutes.

Ms. Dona Cadman: Thank you for showing up.

Gender-based analysis looks at the difference in men's and women's lives and assesses the different impacts that policies, programs, and legislation may have on them. If the central government adopts a national poverty reduction strategy, do you think the GBA should be used as a tool in the development?

Ms. Charlotte Hrenchuk: Definitely. Absolutely.

Ms. Dona Cadman: How can the GBA inform policy-making as it relates to poverty reduction? Can you explain anything?

Ms. Charlotte Hrenchuk: As you've stated, women's lives are distinctly different from men's. Women suffer from many forms of abuse and violence that men do not, which affects how poverty will affect their lives and create situations of poverty, addictions, etc. Women's life cycles are different in the way, as I mentioned earlier, that women often opt out of the wage economy for a while to raise their children. The whole issue of single parenthood affects women more than it does men. All these things affect poverty, so if you're going to have a poverty reduction strategy that really, systemically, attacks the basis of poverty, then you're going to have to look at it through a gendered lens and take into account the realities of women's lives.

Also, older women, senior women, are more often living in poverty than men, perhaps because of the child-bearing years that took them out of their career trajectory or because they were working at lower-paid, seasonal, part-time positions. So the reality of senior women's lives is a lot different from many senior men. You have to look at that in order to reduce the poverty of senior women, the poverty of single women, the poverty of single-parent women, and of youth, teenage girls.

You have to look at the whole issue of child poverty, which to me was completely misrepresented. Child poverty is women's poverty. Most children live with their mothers or in a family. They aren't out there wandering the streets by themselves, unless the family systems have broken down. That is a whole other ball of wax to be addressed in an anti-poverty strategy and act. I think you really have to take a good, hard look at women's poverty if you want to solve the problem of child poverty.

● (1145)

Ms. Dona Cadman: I have a couple of questions and they have to do with shelters. How many shelters are in Whitehorse? Do you know?

Ms. Charlotte Hrenchuk: We have one emergency transition home for women who are experiencing violence. We have one emergency shelter for men and women that's run by the Salvation Army; it has 10 beds. That is supposed to serve the emergency shelter needs of the entire Yukon. It does not accept children. There are three beds reserved for women. Most women do not want to go there unless they are really facing 50 degrees below zero and a park bench, because in that shelter they are facing the very men who abuse them. It's also first come, first served. They have to leave the shelter during the day, and in the winter go from, say, the detox centre to the library, to various other social agencies, until they are able to come back at suppertime.

There is a women's transition home in Dawson City and a women's transition home in Watson Lake. That's it.

Mr. Michael Dougherty: There is as well the attempted youth shelter, which uses the beds at the drug and alcohol treatment centre. Again, it isn't seen as a positive alternative for youth to go there as an emergency shelter. There was an attempt last year by a non-governmental organization, just over here a few blocks, to create another 10-bed shelter, but it met with funding roadblocks and some bureaucratic definitions of what was necessary in order to meet their governmental standards. It has not gotten off the ground. So they are very little help.

Ms. Charlotte Hrenchuk: Yes, there was a tremendous amount of community support for that youth shelter. There was a great fundraising campaign, they had a lot of really good ideas, and a lot of the community was behind it. But I really don't understand why it didn't come about, because they even have a building, which is fully equipped, but they have no O and M money.

Mr. Michael Dougherty: They are relaunching right now, I think, a fundraising campaign again to attempt to bring that to life on their own, but we'll see how successful that is. It's difficult, obviously, the upfront cost of putting something like that together in the community.

Just as another point, in your earlier question, for the last 11 years now I've been a human rights adjudicator here in the territory, and there is that whole focus, of course, that we've had on individual rights. In any anti-poverty process we have to really clearly focus on collective rights, that larger sense of how we as a community work towards the common good, how we provide the basic housing, food, shelter, safety that our people need. What I've mainly dealt with in that part of my life is individual rights. Our focus has been weighted on that side, rather than, as we are going to become more and more aware of in the global context, the need to really stress collective rights in an anti-poverty program of whatever dimension—territorial, national, whatever.

● (1150)

The Chair: I just want to ask a couple of questions to you, Don. They're just around housing.

I know you talk about maybe a hundred new units. Some of the previous presenters talked about the challenge of actually getting great statistics because of a lack of resources to understand. We talk about a hundred new units for Yukon; that's great, and the work is fantastic, but what kinds of shortages are we still talking about?

Mr. Don Routledge: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Our current statistics, and we do them monthly, are in the neighbourhood of a waiting list of 85 in Whitehorse for social housing. From the body that delivers for us, our agency, the Whitehorse Housing Authority, approximately 50 of those would be singles and families and about 30 to 35 would be seniors. The current projections of what we are going to be building in the next two years effectively eliminate the waiting list we have today.

One of the fundamental problems that we still have to acknowledge is that we have a lot of units that are deteriorating and getting past the point of economic repair. The corporation has already decommissioned social housing that was deemed to be beyond economic repair. So right now we're on a very strategic path to address the waiting list we have, both in rural Yukon and in Whitehorse. But as we solve one immediate problem, we still have many more in the future to deal with, particularly with an aging population.

The Chair: Okay.

Charlotte.

Ms. Charlotte Hrenchuk: If I could add to that, my office is in the Victoria Faulkner Women's Centre, which is a women's drop-in centre. On average, I'd say we get a woman coming in there on a daily basis who has nowhere to live. We had women coming in there last winter at minus 50 degrees Celsius who were living in trucks, just camper trucks, or in the cab of their truck, or in a van, or in a cabin that had no windowpanes in the windows or a door that blew open in the wind, etc. These women are not on the waiting list for Yukon Housing. There are very many women who are not on the waiting list for Yukon Housing because they know they would be at the bottom of the list, and it's just another situation that creates more despair.

We have another agency in town called the Grey Mountain Housing Society, which supplies urban aboriginal housing. They're in dire straits. They received no funds from the last federal transfers for housing. A lot of their units are going to be decommissioned for the same reasons Yukon Housing units are being decommissioned: it's just not economically feasible to fix them up any more. I think their projection was that by 2012 they may have no units left.

I don't know where all the people who are living in those homes are supposed to be going, and where all the aboriginal people who continue to come to Whitehorse looking for safety or a better economic opportunity or education are supposed to live. As you know, each first nation is responsible for its own housing.

The current additions Yukon Housing is making to social housing in the Yukon may eliminate the waiting list, but the waiting list does not reflect the reality of the housing situation here in the north. We don't have any minimal rental standards, for instance, so people are living in the most incredible third-world-style poverty here. When I was doing my research study, I had a woman tell me she wasn't homeless; she had four walls around her. It didn't have a roof, but she had four walls, and this was in the dead of a Yukon winter.

There needs to be a heck of a lot more done here in the Yukon in order to decrease homelessness or end homelessness. One homeless person is too many.

● (1155)

The Chair: Mr. Dougherty.

Mr. Michael Dougherty: Certainly, in terms of our community as well, there has been quite a bit of support. We just inaugurated the sixth unit Habitat for Humanity has built here. I don't know whether you've had the opportunity to visit them or look at them. It addresses, again, a low-income need that isn't being addressed by the formal structures that exist, and it's here in the community. The last triplex has had really great cooperation through your organization, as well as Yukon College and the training programs up there. It's been a very happy coincidence, a convergence of goals, but still it just signals the real need that's out there.

In terms of the social housing deficit here, I think the last social housing place, Cyr Place, was 1994. Your accumulated deficit is still a long way from being...and that's here. We're not talking about the communities at all. If you go out to Ross River, to Faro, you're into a whole different game altogether in terms of addressing those fairly fundamental needs. All the basics I'm sure you've heard of in other northern communities, or will hear of—overcrowding, lack of upkeep and maintenance, proper sanitation, etc.—would be mirrored in our communities as well.

The Chair: I have one more question before I turn it over to Mike for a last one. I apologize for my ignorance of northern communities, but talk to me about the things that drive the prices of housing beyond what it would seem.... It seems like there's lots of land, but that obviously is not the case. I haven't been to Fort McMurray, but I know there's a huge issue there that seems to be driven by supply and demand. Talk to me about your specific issues and why the cost is $300,000 versus whatever it may be in other communities.

I appreciate the vast geography to get here for supplies, so that must contribute to some of it. Is land at a premium as well? Once again, talk to me about some of those things.

Mr. Don Routledge: A myriad of factors come into play. To give you a really good example, we built new units in Dawson City. Because of the permafrost—it's a discontinuous permafrost in that community—they tend to have to dig down 15 to 20 feet. One contractor broke his backhoe trying to excavate a lot. In that case the water kept coming into what would have been the hole for the foundation. We got to the point where we said, “Cover it up and we'll use it for parking.” We expended a lot of money and got nothing out of it.

Everything you see here was manufactured elsewhere. We do not have a manufacturing base. The 18-wheelers come up from Edmonton and southern British Columbia. There are products that other Canadians take for granted because of the manufacturing base—in southern Ontario as well. We do not have that, so we have the additional cost of freight. We have higher costs of labour compared to southern Canada.

Land is generally available. A few years ago we had a real spike in new home construction in Whitehorse. For a temporary period, the Government of Yukon ran out of serviced land. But the cost of taking raw land and servicing it is very high. That increases the cost of land at the start of the process, which then increases the overall cost of housing.

We have a very short window of construction compared to a lot of jurisdictions in southern Canada. For example, we have buildings going up right now, and they're trying to clad them against the weather so they can work inside. They then need to have their Herman Nelsons blowing heat into that building to keep the materials and workers warm so they get a higher level of productivity. If you've ever tried to change a tire at 30 below, try to pound nails and use a saw at 30 below. It's not very productive.

When you add all of the factors together, it costs a lot of money to build in the north. The community spatial index for our most northern community, Old Crow—with Whitehorse based at 100—is 220. So you can look at the difference in what things cost, even within the territory.

There's no one easy answer. It's a lot of things combined.

● (1200)

The Chair: I figured that was the case.

Do you have a comment before I turn it over to Mr. Savage?

Mr. Michael Dougherty: On that line, there are attempts here to innovate. There has been a pre-fab log housing program here. People have done stack-wall, straw bale, and rammed earth housing, but there's very little incentive to encourage people to innovate, particularly at lower income levels. There have been discussions about creating free-standing housing cooperatives, and other kinds of structures to do it. But how does that happen, and how, at both the federal and territorial levels, are those processes assisted to make it easier for people on low incomes to thrive rather than just survive?

As I said, my work in Chile was in housing programs. Before the Pinochet military dictatorship, the innovation in housing and the things they were doing to provide basic needs in housing were incredible for a third world country. I still think we're behind where they were in the early 1970s in how to encourage people to address those basic needs themselves or in communities.

The Chair: Thanks.

Mike.

Mr. Michael Savage: Somebody had mentioned stimulus. We all know that there was this big stimulus budget in January, but it's very telling that all the investments for those who might be considered in need are temporary. The social housing, the extension of EI benefits—those were temporary benefits, whereas all the tax cuts that came in, which disproportionately benefited those in need... those are permanent. The problem is that creates a structural deficit that's going to make it even harder for the government to shake loose money that should be shook loose. In fact, the Minister of Human Resources couldn't wait to make an announcement after the budget to reinforce that this was a one-time government investment in social housing. It did not represent a policy shift to a larger federal role in social housing. We don't have a housing strategy in Canada. We need a national housing strategy.

Charlotte, you were talking about lone-parent families. I'm going to quote from Campaign 2000's report of last week:

> While some progress has been achieved, female-led lone parent families carry a disproportionately high burden, with a child poverty rate of 40%—2007 LICO before-tax. Lone mothers face the challenge of being the sole provider while also having to find adequate child care and secure housing, which are often unaffordable. They also struggle to balance education or training, community service, and/or paid work with family responsibilities.

Did you say that 73% of lone-parent aboriginal families live below the LICO? Is that the number you gave?

Ms. Charlotte Hrenchuk: Yes. That is from the 2000 figures reported in the 2006 Statistics Canada report.

Mr. Michael Savage: That's a pretty staggering number.

Ms. Charlotte Hrenchuk: It is a very staggering number.

Mr. Michael Savage: We don't have your reports yet. They have to be translated and everything else, so I just wanted to clear that up.

I thank you.

Any recommendations that you have, that you've given us, we'll certainly take into consideration in putting our report together.

Thank you, Chair.

The Chair: Thank you.

Once again to our witnesses, thank you very much for taking time out of your busy day to be here. We realize that a lot of you are on the front lines making things happen, and if it weren't for you, we would be in a much worse place.

We're trying to get ideas to go back to encourage the government to do these things, to move in these directions, and we really appreciate the nuances of what we're hearing. Although we hear an overarching theme, certainly every area has its own issues that are unique to its situations. Thank you for sharing them, and thank you for being with us here today.

We'll be back at 1:30.

The meeting is adjourned.

Published under the authority of the Speaker of the House of Commons

SPEAKER'S PERMISSION

Additional copies may be obtained from: Publishing and Depository Services
Public Works and Government Services Canada
Ottawa, Ontario K1A 0S5
Telephone: 613-941-5995 or 1-800-635-7943
Fax: 613-954-5779 or 1-800-565-7757
publications@tpsgc-pwgsc.gc.ca
http://publications.gc.ca

Also available on the Parliament of Canada Web Site at the following address: http://www.parl.gc.ca

Publié en conformité de l'autorité du Président de la Chambre des communes

PERMISSION DU PRÉSIDENT

On peut obtenir des copies supplémentaires en écrivant à : Les Éditions et Services de dépôt
Travaux publics et Services gouvernementaux Canada
Ottawa (Ontario) K1A 0S5
Téléphone : 613-941-5995 ou 1-800-635-7943
Télécopieur : 613-954-5779 ou 1-800-565-7757
publications@tpsgc-pwgsc.gc.ca
http://publications.gc.ca

Aussi disponible sur le site Web du Parlement du Canada à l'adresse suivante : http://www.parl.gc.ca