House of Commons
CANADA

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

HUMA • NUMBER 064 • 2nd SESSION • 40th PARLIAMENT

EVIDENCE

Wednesday, December 2, 2009

Chair

Mr. Dean Allison

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

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● (0835)

[*English*]

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

It's great to be here in Yellowknife today. I want to take a second to thank all the witnesses for being here. Thank you for taking time out of your busy schedules as you come to testify.

Very quickly, we've been doing a study on poverty over the last year and a half. We've been east, and we've certainly been out west this week. It was suggested that we come north, and I'm glad we have. We were in Whitehorse yesterday and Yellowknife today, and we are heading back to Edmonton tomorrow.

It has been great to listen to what's going on in the communities. I think we all agree that when we're in Ottawa it's kind of hard to know what's really going on in the country, unless we're out talking to people in their respective communities. So it is good for us to be here.

I'll start with you, Mr. McDonald, for seven minutes. We'll go all the way across for seven minutes, and then we'll look at moving around the room for questions. We'll continue to move that way until we hit 10 a.m., or until people have no more questions, although it has been my experience with politicians that we're never short of questions.

I'll stop talking and turn it over to the witnesses.

Mr. McDonald, you're with Alternatives North. We're looking forward to hearing a bit about your organization, what you do, and maybe some recommendations for us as a committee to take back to the government. Thank you for being here. The floor is yours. You have seven minutes.

Mr. Ben McDonald (Co-Chair, Alternatives North): Thank you for that, Mr. Allison.

Alternatives North is a social justice coalition that operates in the Northwest Territories. Among our ranks are representatives of the Catholic Church, the Anglican Church, organized labour, environmental organizations, small businesses, and other concerned individuals who care about social justice issues. We've been in operation primarily in Yellowknife, but in the Northwest Territories for almost 17 years, so we've had a fairly long time to grow roots in the community.

Over the years we have had special interest in poverty issues. We have produced papers on territorial government clawbacks of the child tax benefit supplement and on poverty specifically, trying to encourage a different strategy on the part of the territorial government when it comes to their income security programs. We have a paper on child care and the need for a universal child care system in the north. We have frequently commented on housing issues, cost-of-living issues, such as energy, and other issues like that.

On behalf of the organization, I'd like to thank you all for coming north. It is a good opportunity for us to exchange views on what may be different perspectives.

To get to the meat of the issue, Alternatives North believes there are two reasons why the federal government should be especially concerned about the eradication of poverty in the north. Issue number one is our territorial status. It means that our tax base, our ability to raise funds to deal with issues on our own, is more limited. Approximately 70% of our budget is a direct grant from the federal government. To deal with any new programs is a huge challenge for our legislative assembly members and the people of the Northwest Territories.

The federal government believes we are best suited to be a territory—I guess in cooperation with the people who live up here. But along with that territorial status comes an obligation to treat us with special care. That includes Yukon and Nunavut as well.

The second characteristic of the north that gives extra responsibility to the federal government lies in the composition of our population. With a large number of aboriginal people in the Northwest Territories, the federal government has fiduciary responsibility for them. When you look at the statistics on how people live in the Northwest Territories, there is clearly a race divide on an income basis. The statistics from the NWT Bureau of Statistics bears that out. There is a special problem with aboriginal people in the Northwest Territories when it comes to income security.

Those are the two primary reasons for our believing that the federal government should take a lead on the anti-poverty issues. But it should also address the territories in a different way from some of the provinces.

We are now in a recession. The most recent statistics you'll find from the Bureau of Statistics are from 2006. I think we have a fairly serious problem developing in the Northwest Territories as a result of the recession. Mines are slowing down, governments are trying to pull in their horns, and large employers like the transportation sector are all trying to pull in their horns.

With unemployment comes greater poverty. So this is a bad time, and it's an especially propitious time for the federal government to be looking at an anti-poverty strategy. This is the time, when we're looking for solutions to the recession, to also look for solutions to poverty.

On the specific area of an anti-poverty strategy, we believe there are examples both in the country and internationally that I'm sure members of the committee are more familiar with than I am. But programs are successful if they have measurable goals and goals that measure the social conditions of the people who are affected by them.

● (0840)

We want to look at the health of children. We want to look at housing situations, and other things like that. So any anti-poverty strategy that comes out should have measurable targets. It should have funding that is dedicated to the task. And it should be an upfront and open program resulting from consultation with the people most affected by the issue.

In the Northwest Territories there's a special problem with homelessness. I mentioned this before. But I do believe that any strategy that comes out is going to require a national housing program of some sort. It should deal with providing resources to the territorial and provincial governments to allow them to augment the public housing situation. It also would be wise for us to go back to the idea of co-op housing, where private ownership is not necessary. There are cooperative principles that operate in the Northwest Territories as well as in the rest of the country, and it would be good for the federal government to show leadership in those areas and move in that direction.

Another area that I think the federal government has a special role in accommodating is the universal child care plan. In Yellowknife there are presently only three operating child care centres for a town of 19,000. It's very difficult for anybody to find child care services that are very accessible.

Another area where I think the federal government has a role to play is in facilitating the greater unionization of the workforce. The statistics are quite clear that poverty levels go down as the proportion of the labour force that is unionized goes up. There's a direct correlation there. That's a federal government responsibility.

We also think that the feds can help with improving the minimum wage. The number being bandied around is $10 an hour on a national level. But for high-cost areas like the Northwest Territories, if there is to be a minimum wage, then there should be a cost of living factor added on top of that for remote areas, where $10 an hour is just simply not adequate.

I realize I'm out of time. I just want to get in the fact that Alternatives North believes the first pillar that needs to be addressed is getting more money into the hands of poor people. We believe one of the ways to achieve this, one of the ways that seems to be most efficient for dealing with this, is through a guaranteed annual income. We endorse that as a principle. We believe the federal government could achieve this, with its relatively deeper pockets and its ability to set national standards and to make the money that is available to the territories and provinces conditional on those national standards.

I thank you for that.

● (0845)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. McDonald.

We're now going to move to Gordon Van Tighem, president of the Northwest Territories Association of Communities. He is also the Mayor of the City of Yellowknife.

Mr. Mayor, welcome, sir. The floor is yours.

Mr. Gordon Van Tighem (President and Mayor of the City of Yellowknife, Northwest Territories Association of Communities): Good morning, and *bienvenue à* Yellowknife.

The Northwest Territories Association of Communities welcomes the opportunity to appear before the committee today and share some of our views. Our association was formed in 1967. The membership includes 27 of 33 communities and is home to approximately 97% of NWT residents.

Poverty is an issue that affects every community in the Northwest Territories, whether it's homeless people we meet on the streets of Yellowknife, families depending on social assistance and facing high food, fuel, and heating costs in isolated communities, or a person working for a low wage struggling to get by in a high-cost environment.

We see many of the same problems experienced in southern Canada, but here in the NWT the impact of poverty is magnified by transportation challenges, the boom-and-bust cycle of our economy, and electricity costs that top $2 per kilowatt hour in some communities. In Paulatuk, which is home to 300 people on the shore of the Beaufort Sea, a two-litre carton of milk costs almost $9 and a loaf of bread will take a $7.20 bite out of your family budget.

NWT'S 33 communities are small and spread out—only nine have 800 people or more and only five have more than 1,000 people. We total a little over 43,000 people, 31% of whom are 19 years of age or younger. There's been plenty of talk lately about the importance of the Canadian Arctic, and it can be difficult to know where to begin in dealing with the challenges presented by poverty in the north.

You'll be hearing presentations about the things we need—day care, lower food costs, improved food mail, increased northern living allowances, and other ideas. These are all important things, but we believe that building healthy, strong, and sustainable communities is a step towards tackling poverty in the Northwest Territories. By investing in communities, we can provide a foundation for a strong economy and healthy families.

In towns that have good water, affordable housing, power, and jobs, people can live healthy lifestyles. To get there, we've identified four critical areas: transportation infrastructure, community infrastructure deficit, federal funding programs, and the importance of our having a say in our own future.

One factor that drives up the cost of living is our transportation system. Perishable food has to be flown into many communities on a regular basis. Basics are shipped in via barge or sealift in the summer or by ice roads during the coldest part of the year.

You may have caught *Ice Pilots NWT*, a show that just was launched on History Television. It's about Buffalo Airways and their operation in the north. One of the first episodes chronicled how a broken engine on an airplane caused food not to be delivered to one Sahtu community for several days. Shelves were bare, and what fresh produce remained was old and mouldy. The challenge is the weather. And you can see that getting a good meal, when you can afford the staples, is even more challenging.

Half our communities still don't have year-round road access. While we don't expect roads to all of our communities, improving transportation links is essential. Our member communities believe that completing the Mackenzie Valley Highway from Wrigley to the Dempster Highway and from Inuvik to Tuktoyaktuk is one of the crucial building blocks. In May our members endorsed two resolutions calling for just that, and in October the Canadian Chamber of Commerce also endorsed a resolution calling for completion of the Mackenzie Valley Highway, which they referred to as the north-south TransCanada Highway.

The Federation of Canadian Municipalities' policy statement on the northern and remote issue says that existing transportation networks significantly impede economic competitiveness and quality of life in northern communities. This is a factor that's often overlooked, quite aside from the positive benefits of the Mackenzie project.

In September we welcomed nearly $1 million to do preliminary work on an all-weather road linking Tuktoyaktuk to Inuvik. It's an important step in living up to Prime Minister John Diefenbaker's dream from over 50 years ago of building roads to resources. We hope it doesn't end there and that it continues with the next step, the completion of the Mackenzie Valley Highway, which was promised by Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau in 1972.

In 2007, the FCM reported that across Canada the municipal infrastructure deficit was over $123 billion. That's the cost of maintaining and upgrading existing and municipally owned assets, suggesting a crisis. Here in the north, estimates suggest that the community infrastructure deficit is about $400 million. Those needs include recreation facilities, fire protection equipment, roads, solid waste sites, and other municipal buildings, infrastructure that is essential to improving quality of life and providing a base to build a sustainable economy.

● (0850)

Thanks to the territorial New Deal for Communities, responsibility for infrastructure development and guaranteed annual funding was transferred to community governments a couple of years ago, and our communities have taken charge of addressing their own infrastructure needs.

Even so, we depend on programs like the federal gas tax and Building Canada fund, which also brings challenges, such as the community's ability to fund its portion. I heard it mentioned in the Yukon that it's a challenge in aboriginal communities because most of the federal programs are set up on a reserve basis and we don't have those. We've had to find other creative ways of flowing funds to aboriginal communities. Again, we'd like to quote the FCM:

> If Canada is to prosper, municipal infrastructure investments must support the economic potential of our cities and communities. For this to happen, funding must reflect the long-term nature of infrastructure investments.

We also want to express the important role communities play on the front line of Canadian sovereignty in the north. Without communities, Canada's claim to the Arctic is weakened, and of course these communities need people where there are jobs and where they can afford to live. NWT has seen considerable investment in recent years, thanks to programs like MRIF, the gas tax fund, and Building Canada, with the latter two being excellent examples that are built around a base-plus formula that gives our community real dollars but allows us to build.

What doesn't work in the north is per capita funding. It sounds fair, and maybe it is in southern Canada, but the north's small population and high costs combine to make it unworkable. For example, the recent RInC formula, the Recreational Infrastructure Canada funding, provided $189,000 to each of the three northern territories. I don't need to give examples of how little that can do. The NWT did not seek any of the first-round funding. In the second round, 22 communities applied and three years' funding of $550,000 has been allocated.

This is simply another example of why per capita funding doesn't work. I'd like to look at the cost of construction in the north. To build a middle-class garage, it's $134 a foot in Calgary; it's $124 a foot in Edmonton, $120 in Grande Prairie. In Fort Smith, Northwest Territories, it's $164 a foot. In Yellowknife, it's $164 a foot. It's $208 a foot in Inuvik, and it's $314 in Sachs Harbour.

You also need to understand that if you need a crane, in some of the communities it has to come in on the sealift one year and it may not get out until the next year, so there's a piece of equipment tied up. You might only need it for three weeks.

It's also necessary to point out the challenges of dealing with the federal bureaucracy. There are accounting rules and reporting procedures that must be followed. However, it can be challenging for a community to complete a complicated application form when they only have a few days to do it. Even if they can get through that, they have to wait months to hear back, watching their very short building season slip away.

In the past couple of months, we have seen a number of House of Commons committees visit the north. We welcome the opportunity to have our say and to be heard, but it can't end there. The NWT's hamlets, settlements, villages, towns, and cities will be profoundly affected by the decisions that will be made in the coming years. We should be granted a prominent, meaningful role in making policy decisions that will shape the Arctic and our hometown.

When Canada's northern strategy was unveiled this summer, the announcement took place in Ottawa. The commitments being made are important and welcome, but northern voices were noticeably absent. We expect big things. We now have a northern economic development agency, CanNor, but its funding programs now go directly to communities. It sounds like an efficient move, but they used to depend on the Department of Municipal and Community Affairs of the Government of Northwest Territories to fill in the forms for them, so there's a little leap there.

In closing, thank you for the time to speak with you today. We know that tackling the problem of poverty is a huge issue that will take several years, hard work, and plenty of dollars to overcome. We hope that NWT communities can be part of the solution. To do that, we need to improve our transportation links, funding programs based on a base-plus formula that recognizes our significant challenges. Most of all, we want to be partners in planning the programs and building the north so our people can have good jobs, healthy lives, and where everyone can afford to buy a carton of milk and a loaf of bread.

● (0855)

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Gordon.

We're now going to move over to Ms. Wilson, with the YWCA in Yellowknife. Ms. Wilson is the director of emergency and transitional housing.

Welcome, Ms. Wilson. The floor is yours.

Ms. Catherine Wilson (Director, Emergency and Transitional Housing, YWCA Yellowknife): Thank you.

Welcome to Yellowknife. I'm really pleased to be here today.

The YWCA has been in Yellowknife for over 40 years, providing various services to families that are experiencing homelessness. Basically, we take care of and provide services for the poor in the community.

I've been involved with the Y for the past 12 years, and I just want to share some of the experiences of the families that we see here in the north. I don't have any recommendations to give you, but I want to put a face to the poor people in this community, and especially in the north.

In my 15 years of being here—I came to Canada as an immigrant, and I'm trying to share my story so you can know the perception I'm coming from. I came to Canada as an immigrant, found my way up here in Yellowknife, and ended up working with the aboriginal women at the Native Women's Association. I've been working with women for 15 years, since I've been here in the north.

My perception of Canada, coming from Ghana, in West Africa, was of a land of plenty, a land of opportunity, a land where you can do and become whoever you want to become if you put work to it. Very inspiring. We bundled up and we came. And it has been good to me. Canada is a good country. But coming up here and seeing the aboriginal people who live here and the opportunities that I, as an immigrant, was able to get here but that were not provided to them, that broke my heart. The way they live in the community in Yellowknife breaks my heart.

There is no rhyme or reason why any person in the north should be living in sub-third world country standards. We live in a place that is minus 40 degrees, where the wind chill can go to minus 60, and people are sleeping outside because there's no housing. Freezing to death in Canada, which is a first world country, is not acceptable. We see the faces of women and children weeping, crying, because there is no food on the table to eat. That is not our Canada. That is not the Canada we dreamed of. We see fathers and mothers and children all in despair because there's nowhere to go, no dreams that they can aspire to that will be meaningful to their families. The sense of hopelessness, the sense of urgency, you know, in their everyday living, of hoping to grasp onto something that they can do just to have a living is incredible.

The YWCA provides several programs. We provide shelter for a woman fleeing from abuse, we provide emergency and transitional housing for families experiencing homelessness, we provide housing for people with disabilities. We also provide the after-school program in all the schools in Yellowknife to help families and children.

Every family that has come through the Y has really great needs. Housing, food, the basic needs that should be provided to these families are not met.

Yellowknife attracts most of the people from the communities. When you go to the communities, when you look at the housing situation there, it's really deplorable. You can find 15 people, 12 people, both adults and children, all living in their one or two bedrooms. And I'm not talking really, really nice houses, but houses with no insulation, housing that is dilapidated. People are sleeping in shifts in the north. This is not Canada.

● (0900)

If they have a medical situation and they're coming to Yellowknife, they get here and most of them see some of the programs they can get here. They can be close to schools; that will provide their kids with good schools. They have recreational centres that they can access for their kids. They can get to counselling. So they decide to move here with their children.

For example, a family or a mom comes in from a community to do something medical here for the first time. She sees the amenities here and thinks she can bring her children; they could get good schools, they have all sorts of things they can do. So they move here to Yellowknife. When they move to Yellowknife they bring their children. The first thing they face is money for food, because once you get here and you decide to stay here, you are basically on your own. So you have to find housing, and there is none. The landlords will not rent to people who are on income support because the system does not provide rent early enough to make it worthwhile for them, so they don't.

Then they don't have any place to go. Sometimes they sleep with friends, and you can find them sleeping on friends' couches with children in other places. Then they have to take the child to school. How do they get there? It's minus 40, and they have to work. Sometimes in the houses they are in they can't even sleep because there is a lot of addictions going on there. So if they can't sleep, how can they work?

The needs of the north are many. Unfortunately, a majority of the people who we see are aboriginal people.

When they come into transitional housing, which is the program I run, we try to stabilize the family so we provide a roof over their head. We have 39 apartment units in which we house families experiencing homelessness. Those units we furnish through the community. So the community of Yellowknife gives us donations all year round so that we can furnish those units for family use. So basically a family can come to this program, get a place to stay; they can just come with whatever clothes they have on, have a place to stay, shelter, furniture. We provide some food before their assistance on income support kicks in, because there is a process that takes about a week or a week and a half to get into it. So we provide them with something to tide them over until their money gets in. We help them so they can get their children to school.

We provide support services. If they have any addictions, we help them and refer them. We have programs like that in Yellowknife, mine being one of them, and the Centre for Northern Families is another. There's also the Salvation Army. And there's the SideDoor, which takes care of youth, but they don't have any shelter for them.

These are the four programs that we provide here in Yellowknife for families experiencing homelessness. All of these programs are running in the negative. We are not being funded appropriately to help families. The human misery that we see up here is not warranted, not in a first world country. We see houses being built, roads being paved, all sorts of economic development stuff, and human beings sleeping on the street because they don't have anywhere to go. We need to do something, and it's urgent, especially in Yellowknife. It's not getting any better. I've been here for 15 years and it's actually getting worse.

The services that are being provided to the poor people are not adequate. We want to help poor people so that they can integrate into society and become somebody and contribute within the society, and yet the support services and the programs that are provided for them don't help their situation. It doesn't. Somebody on income support with three children, a mother with three children on income support, is basically as good as dead, because the money that is provided to help her to feed her children doesn't even last for two weeks here in the north. She has to find other means to get food on the table.

● (0905)

Housing that she can get into, which is public housing, works on points. If, for example, she's staying with somebody, it's not good enough. She basically has to be out on the land, at the park, camping in minus 40 degrees, for her to qualify to be on top of the list so she can have a place to stay. This is not good.

I don't know what else I can say, but I think my time is already done. There is more that I can say, but I'm glad you are here today listening to this. I am hoping you put a sense of urgency on this and do something for the poor in Canada, and especially in Canada's north.

Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Wilson. I think probably through the questions you may get a chance to add more to that.

We're going to start as we normally do, over on my left-hand side here.

Mr. Savage, the floor is yours for seven minutes.

Mr. Michael Savage (Dartmouth—Cole Harbour, Lib.): Thank you, Chair, and thank you all for coming this morning.

My name is Mike Savage and I'm a member of the Liberal Party. I'm the human resources critic. I come from Nova Scotia. We've been working on this poverty study now for some time, going back into the last Parliament, and it's important for us to come to places like Yellowknife and Whitehorse and the other communities we've been visiting this week. Although we know there are some national strategies that can deal with some of the basic things—a lot of the things that you mentioned, Ben, in terms of social justice and the poverty needs of Canada—there are some unique issues that we need to make part of our report as well, and every place we go, we hear about those.

In British Columbia, on Monday, we heard a lot about the loss of the salmon and how that's affecting particularly indigenous people there. Yesterday we heard about communities that don't have clean water and about the cost of construction, and we're hearing some of those stories today.

One of the things I'm struck by is that in the statistics, in looking at the places we're visiting this week, if you compare Winnipeg and Yellowknife, for example, in Winnipeg the average house cost, or the average value of an owned dwelling, in 2006 was $168,000, and in Yellowknife it was $302,000, so almost twice as high. A two-bedroom apartment rents for $769 in Winnipeg and in Yellowknife it rents for $1,450. In Winnipeg the minimum wage is $9, and in Yellowknife it's $8.25, if I understand it. I don't know where you'd live if you made $8.25 an hour in Yellowknife. Where would you live?

● (0910)

Mr. Gordon Van Tighem: Hopefully, with your parents.

Mr. Michael Savage: There wouldn't be a lot of options, and I think that's what you're reinforcing to us. There are obviously some very unique needs, minimum wage being one of them.

There are those who say that in addressing poverty, what we need to do is increase the economy of a country—a rising tide lifts all boats. Undoubtedly, there's some truth to that, but the Northwest Territories has gone through a pretty big increase in its GDP, the highest increase per capita in Canada from 2001 to 2006, but we still have that huge gap between the rich and the poor. I just wonder if anybody would like to talk about that a bit.

Mr. Ben McDonald: Yes, I think that's a great point. We've had many booms and busts in the past, where we've had strong GDP growth, high national income, that sort of thing, but poverty has been with us through all the booms and the busts. I think the concept of a rising tide raising all boats is not an operational one, if we actually want to deal with poverty in a meaningful way.

I think it might be part of the overall package, but if we're looking specifically at poverty, at an anti-poverty strategy, then the idea that a general boost to the economy is going to be a general boost to poor people, I just don't think holds water. We have to distinguish between those two. We have to dedicate effort and money and planning to getting poor people non-poor. And at the same time, or on a parallel course, I guess we can do economic development.

Mr. Michael Savage: My good friend, Carolyn Bennett, often says that Canadians expect European-style social programs on American-style taxation. I think that is one of the things this poverty study has to address.

Food Banks Canada released its annual report, which showed that in Canada, food bank usage went up 18%. They also indicated that they are now identifying who is coming to food banks. I have a quote. It says: “Aboriginal people constitute a slightly larger proportion of food bank clients, making up more than 11% of those assisted in 2008 and 2009... Provincial figures vary considerably, with Aboriginal people”—first nations, Métis, and Inuit people—“accounting for 91% of food bank clients in the territories”.

We are not meeting with anybody. Is there a food bank here in Yellowknife, and would 90% of the recipients be aboriginal people? Perhaps, Kate, you could talk about what percentage of the people you deal with who are in crisis are aboriginal.

Ms. Catherine Wilson: At least 95% of the people we deal with are aboriginal.

Mr. Michael Savage: Mayor, would that make sense in terms of food bank usage?

Mr. Gordon Van Tighem: Definitely. We have several food bank types of outlets. Our specific food bank only opens once a week. I heard statistics from the Yukon, which you probably heard yesterday, that food bank usage has gone from families to single males, and there is a transition that is being observed. We also have a food rescue program. They've diverted about 75 tonnes of food that would have been in the dump. It has gone into feeding people. It's a growth industry.

Mr. Michael Savage: One of the things the food bank people reported last year was that in 2009 versus 2008, usage was up 18% overall nationally. Last year it was pretty stable, but they've had a higher percentage of working poor who use the food banks. I would have to think that in a place like Yellowknife, where the cost of living is so high and wages on the low end do not necessarily keep up with that, the issue of the working poor must be an exploding issue of poverty. I'm just guessing. I'm looking to see if that is true.

Ms. Catherine Wilson: That is true, from what we see. We have a program the Y runs. We call it a clothing exchange. We collect donations from the community and put them in this place. We open it on Wednesdays. We've done that for about 10 years. Anybody who needs any clothing or any furnishings or kitchen utensils can come there and pick what they need, and it's free. Over the years, we've seen the dynamics changing in the people who come there to take clothing and items. We are seeing more of the working poor coming in as well as the poor themselves. It is changing. We are seeing more of those coming into our transitional housing also, because they cannot afford the rent that is out there.

● (0915)

Mr. Gordon Van Tighem: The thing that also shows in your statistics is the gap in our wages. We have the second highest family income in Canada here, but we also have the poor and the working poor, which creates a challenge. It is an extremely generous community in the north, so a lot of that is masked. Kate mentioned the clothing and the food that is distributed. There are several outlets that do that as well within the city. Sometimes the statistics aren't there, because a lot of it is masked by the generosity of the community.

Ms. Catherine Wilson: I can add a little bit. For example, the transitional apartments we run are all furnished by the community. When the families move out, we give them the furniture to help them with their transition, and we replace it. We have been doing that for 10 years. It has been the community that has been providing those donations so that we can continue to run this program.

Mr. Ben McDonald: An element of this as well is that when you have higher-paid government jobs, higher-paid mining jobs, and higher-paid transportation industry jobs, when those folks lose their employment, they often have the choice of going back home. Many of those folks are from eastern Canada, southern Canada, or western Canada. Those people have options available to them that cause them to leave the community. The working poor and the aboriginal folks don't have that choice. That is not available to them. When they are in that situation, they have to make do in the sorts of situations Kate and Gord have been talking about. That's why there is a race face to the nature of poverty in the Northwest Territories.

Mr. Michael Savage: I know I'm out of time. I'd just note that you mentioned the clawback on the national child benefit. That's something we need to make sure of: that any provincial clawbacks of federal programs be part of the recommendation.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: I'll give people a chance to put on their headsets, if they need translation, so that I don't cut into Mr. Lessard's time. Once you're ready, I'll give him a chance to get going.

Mr. Lessard, the floor is yours, sir. You have seven minutes—and welcome to the group.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Yves Lessard (Chambly—Borduas, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I am pleased to see all of you again. I say it to our guests, because I could not be in Vancouver and Whitehorse. I also want to thank you for being there.

My name is Yves Lessard, and I am the Member of Parliament for Chambly—Borduas. The riding is located south of Montreal. I see here that the population of the Northwest Territories is 41,464. There are two and a half times that many people in my riding. I realize that the situation is altogether different, since my riding is in an urban area that I can cover by car in half a day, whereas you sometimes have to cross your territory by plane and it takes a day.

I myself am from a region with wide-open spaces, Abitibi-Témiscamingue. I am also quite familiar with life throughout northwestern Quebec.

I am going to refer to the evidence from Ms. Wilson, who came here 12 years ago now. When she arrived, we were normally supposed to be at the last stage in the process of attaining zero poverty. We known that in 1989, the House of Commons voted unanimously in favour of the objective of eliminating poverty by the year 2000. Yet we still see situations like the one Ms. Wilson described.

I know from evidence given in other circumstances, in particular when we studied employability, that it is not social solidarity or local or territorial solidarity that is lacking, as the mayor so aptly told this committee. It seems to me that what is missing is something else that we have yet to discover. Do we have to look to powers or strategic measures to meet this objective? That is I want to explore a bit with you.

I will start with Mr. McDonald. You said at the outset that we needed to talk about territorial status. If I understand you correctly, the territory should be treated differently than the provinces. Can you explain to us briefly what you mean by that and how that would change our approach and the way we deal with poverty?

● (0920)

[*English*]

Mr. Ben McDonald: Thank you for the question.

The way the territorial funding formula is derived is I think a critical aspect to this. I'm not sure the committee is familiar with the way it's done, and I'm not going to do it justice either, but there is a package or a standard of living equated for the south that is based on a certain package of taxes and social services and other things like that. Then there's a calculation done to determine what kind of money would be required by the territories to provide a similar service here, considering what we can raise with our own source revenues. That money then comes to us in the form of a formula funding grant.

The point I'm making is that if we are going to have an anti-poverty strategy that works in the north, the formula should accommodate this as an extra. It has to be an add-on, I think, in the formula. It can't just be, as Gord was saying, a per capita funding grant that goes to all provinces, or something like that, because the federal government looks at us and says, "If you were living in Toronto, or if you were living in Prince Edward Island, this is how much money you'd need to do so." That is now the standard we're supposed to be living under.

My point in saying this was that the formula should accommodate an anti-poverty strategy, if that's the direction we're going in.

Is that clear?

[*Translation*]

Mr. Yves Lessard: How would it change a situation like the one described by the mayor, namely that in some communities, people pay $9 for a quart of milk and $7 for a loaf of bread? That is a striking example in my opinion, because these are basic needs, in the same way electricity is a basic need. This is one of the few places where we worry about electricity.

At the same time, the mayor raises the question of transportation. In winter, planes are the mode of transportation; in summer it's boats. Are there other ways? Is it enough to build a road or will we still end up with very high prices and a situation that stays the same, because the community did not have the means to take matters into hand in order to get fresh food at lower prices.

I do not know if what I am saying is clear, but it seems to me that there is a risk of ending up back in the same situation.

[*English*]

Mr. Gordon Van Tighem: As a comparison, suppose I were to live in Norman Wells. My food, especially perishables, comes in by aircraft in the wintertime, until the winter road goes in. Once the winter road goes in, there's trucking, so the milk goes down from $12 a litre to the more normal $4 or $5 a litre, so people tend to stockpile. Then, at the end of the winter season the road goes out, and they depend on air briefly until the river opens and they can barge things in. The cost of barging and the cost of trucking are dramatically lower than the cost of air travel. There are also restrictions on air travel and challenges with the food mail program. It was recently changed to include volume as well as weight, because they found that a box of Cheerios takes up a lot of the airplane.

Another example is Yellowknife. Yellowknife as a community has large national chains located here. They're resupplied by truck. They use their national catalogue and make a good living. We have a road access except for a period of up to six weeks every year when the ferry isn't operating and the ice road isn't operating. What they do in that case, based on the volume—we're the largest self-sustainable community in the north—is suck that up over the rest of the year and still maintain the national pricing. So getting the goods flowing on a more competitive transportation basis, if you can, reduces the cost.

● (0925)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Yves Lessard: True. I understand that cost is an issue, but ongoing support is an issue, too. We are constantly trying to look deeper for the real means we can recommend. I will again use the example given by Ms. Wilson, and you also raised the question of housing.

For almost 10 years, the federal government did not provide any funds for housing. Funding has now been restored, but there is a large housing deficit throughout the territory and especially in areas like yours.

How do we prevent these things from happening again and how do we act quickly so that the families Ms. Wilson described have a place to live? It seems to me personally that the most promising ideas or suggestions should come from those who are living in the situation.

I repeat my question. In your opinion, what approaches should be taken? Is it simply a matter of money, or is it more than that? I put the question to each of you.

[*English*]

Ms. Catherine Wilson: Thank you.

When you go to the communities and you see the number of houses compared to the number of people living there, you know there is a severe housing shortage. The number of housing units needs to increase. I know the government is the largest landlord in most of the communities. They don't even have enough money to upgrade the houses to standard.

Money is good, but how much? As Gord said, the money that comes into the north to build a one-bedroom or three-bedroom apartment is about two times the cost in Winnipeg, for example. You can build two houses in Winnipeg for the cost of building one here in the north. Money helps. If we can get the money to increase the number of units in the communities, that would help a lot.

When you look at Inuvik, for example, you have families that don't have places to stay. They tend to travel down to Yellowknife because it's a big city and they might get an apartment. They might get other resources. They might get counselling services. They might get treatment services, those kinds of things. If they don't have anywhere to stay and they come here and have a friend or someone to stay with for a while, they choose that.

Yellowknife is short of houses, as are all the communities around the north, both in NWT and in Nunavut.

It's a really basic need, but if we provide enough money to build those houses for four people, I believe that will solve a lot of problems. At least a basic need will be met. At least families will have a place to put their heads, a place where they can take the time to gather their energy to take care of their families.

● (0930)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Lessard.

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

Mr. Tony Martin (Sault Ste. Marie, NDP): Thank you. It's good to be in Yellowknife, and it's good to have Mr. Lessard back. He's a big supporter of the work we do here, and he is certainly very passionate about the issue of poverty. It's nice to have him. As a matter of fact, I want to say the only reason we're up here and doing this work is because all of the parties have agreed that this is an important priority the government should be taking a look at, and all of us are sincerely looking for answers that might get us there.

We're nearing the end of a fairly lengthy exercise. We've been at this for a year and a half to two years now. We're looking at a report we will table in the House of Commons that will have in it some action plans. As I look at it myself and try to contribute to that work, there are three things, among others, that jump out at me that we need to address in some meaningful way. One is income security, the other is housing, and then there's this notion of social inclusion, making sure people are able to participate in the education system, health care, social programs in the community, and that kind of thing. How we get there and how we do that is of course the challenge.

There was a sense over the last 10 to 15 years—I've been in public life now for close to 20 years—that somehow the market, if it's doing well, will lift all the boats. I think the Northwest Territories is an excellent example of that really not being the case. Actually, when the economy gets good up here—as it is and is projected to continue to be—there are a lot of people who fall through the cracks and aren't benefiting because the cost of living goes up. As the economy gets better, the cost of living goes up, and if wages don't keep pace, and if the cost of delivering services to people who are in difficulty increases, it becomes more and more difficult. So in my view, government really does have a major role to play in making sure we have some level of equity, justice, and fairness, and that we're keeping people in a state that has them ready to participate when the opportunity presents itself.

I've heard three things this morning that I hadn't heard so far. One is this whole issue in the north of transportation, the impact it has on both access to goods and the cost of goods. Also, not that I haven't heard of it before, but there's the notion of the working poor. It's a new revelation—across the country, actually—that people working at minimum wage full time year-round can't afford the basics. So they live in poverty. There's the suggestion that maybe if we allowed organizing labour unions more readily, then some of that might be dealt with. Then there's this notion of sleeping in shifts. I would probably want you to talk to me a bit more about that.

Given income security, housing, and social inclusion, maybe you might speak to those—any one of you—and offer any suggestions you might have for the federal government. That's what we're looking at, the federal role in a national anti-poverty strategy here, how the federal government could play a constructive, positive role on those fronts.

The Chair: Gordon.

Mr. Gordon Van Tighem: One of the things is in the process of being addressed—everything is always in the process of being addressed. We mentioned the economy and the fact that there are people falling through the cracks. One of the challenges is that our economy is to a great extent based on non-renewable resource development, and that creates boom and bust. In the boom, everything's happening; people are moving around. In the bust, those who can, move out, as Ben said, and for those who can't, the crack comes back down and they're back on the surface again.

Economic diversification, getting into some measure of stability in the economy would be one thing. CanNor and the Northern Economic Development Agency are a good first step on that. How can we grow on that?

This also ties to the discussion of housing. There's a Mohawk economist I've quoted from in a few presentations, and he says that no aboriginal community is going to excel until the government gets out of the housing area. Basically what he's talking about is the promotion of independence, the building of capacity there.

I ran an NGO for six years that was a community mobilization program. What we did was assist people in the transition from the traditional economy into the wage economy and the community around them. It pointed out to us that one of the key things... I'm a banker; I'm retired from a bank. I got involved in the program because I did the family budgeting thing. We ran 840 people through the program over those six years, and I found two in that period of time who could do budgeting for housing. The housing that's in the communities is frequently provided by the government, so it's not something people understand. When they move to a larger community, like Inuvik, Hay River, Fort Smith, or Yellowknife, they run into what Kate has described, in terms of what they're hitting.

Education is a critical component in preparing people for life, and I don't mean just the young kids coming up through school; I mean people moving into their first job. A person in the north could be moving into their first job at the age of 50, because they've suddenly decided that hunting and trapping are starting to get on their weary bones, so let's go drive a truck in a mine. There's a huge life-change decision that happens. Of the two people I ran into who could do housing, one of them was a fellow who was approaching 50 and had actually owned a home for a brief time.

Education is key, as is diversification of the economy, hopefully, so that there's more stability.

● (0935)

Mr. Ben McDonald: There are probably two comments I'd like to make. One is that I don't think I necessarily have prescriptions for what would be a good program for the Northwest Territories, and that probably speaks to what I think the federal government should be looking for if it does come up with an anti-poverty strategy. It can't be one-size-fits-all. It has to empower provincial and territorial governments to address the problems that are endemic in their local area. For us that includes transportation, it includes housing, and other matters like that.

I don't have an immediate prescription for how to do that, but I think the critical thing is that we're not the same as Prince Edward Island, we're not the same as a riding south of Montreal. The country is big and diverse and we have different problems. There should be an anti-poverty strategy that sets a minimum standard underneath all Canadians. How we actually get there should be achieved through consultation and through the empowerment of people closer to on-the-ground services.

I don't know if that's helpful to you.

On a second point, you spoke about the history of how Canada has been operating in the last 15 or 20 years. In 1995 there was an across-the-board 5% cut implemented in the Northwest Territories as a cost-saving measure. The housing programs were killed, income security programs were killed, and we've still not recovered from that to this day. The soft services were the ones that were cut; the hard services were maintained. That 5% translated into virtually no housing being built in the Northwest Territories, outside of the few communities that have a market.

I'm not sure if people are clear on the fact that in the communities there is no market for private housing. Very few are built and very few are ever sold. There just is no market there. When we talk we have to be conscious of the reality up here. In the smaller communities no one's going to build or buy or sell a house. There are financial or banking reasons for that.

Where I'm going on that is that I think we got ourselves into the position we're in now, with the poverty at the level we have, the desperation at the level we have now, at least in part through conscious public policy.

The Chair: Go ahead, Ms. Wilson.

Ms. Catherine Wilson: The measure of a good community or a good country, as I understand it, is how it treats its poor. So for a good country, you look at the poor people in that country and see how they are being taken care of. I look at Canada, and I look at Canada's north, and the aboriginal people are not living well. They are not living well. You go to the communities and it's sad.

For somebody who takes care of people who are poor, I don't have anything to say about how to do it, or who should do it, or who should solve the problem. All I know is it needs to be solved. Whether it's the feds, or it's the provinces, or it's the community, it needs to be done. People need to have that basic human right of shelter over their head and food on the table.

What are we doing as humans to the other humans in our system who are not doing well? What are we doing? Where is the will? Of course, right now there's a will. That's why we are all here. But when is it going to be done? I've said it in forums like this and it's happened, but it seems as though it's always being talked about and nothing is being done. There is a sense of urgency in the north. So I'm pleading with you, for the people here, for the aboriginal people here in the north, please do something.

I always have this saying and I'm going to say it, and I don't know how appropriate it's going to be, but if this were happening to any group of people elsewhere in the world, it would be called genocide. It would be called genocide. So what are we doing here as Canadians? Why are aboriginal people, who own this land in the north, living in standards that are lower than those in the third world? I think that's all I have to say.

● (0940)

The Chair: Thank you, Tony.

Thank you, Ms. Wilson.

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

Ms. Dona Cadman (Surrey North, CPC): Thank you.

You said there were four shelters in Yellowknife? There are only four. And yours is the only one that deals with women?

Ms. Catherine Wilson: It deals with families.

Ms. Dona Cadman: It deals with women and families.

There's obviously a big need. I really don't know what to say, because your stories have really touched me. What can we do? Give us some direction. Help us.

We understand there are a lot of problems, that there's a lot of poverty. Where do we start?

Mr. Gordon Van Tighem: Just to explain, we said that within Yellowknife we have one of the most effective homelessness coalitions under the national homelessness strategy in the country. All of the people, Kate and her confreres in the other support agencies, get together on a monthly basis with all of the government funders and program operators and they have an open discussion. They've broken down and set their strategies and priorities.

We have built a transitional centre for men, which supports the emergency centre for men. There are about 49 beds, I believe, in the emergency shelter, and those beds can include mats. There are 32 in the transitional shelter. Kate and the YWCA run an emergency program for families. Then the Centre For Northern Families runs a program for women. Our current highest priority is to build a transitional shelter for women. There's just been an application to the housing corporation for the funding to put that in place.

The other challenge is that we do have a centre for youth, but under the social services legislation, young offenders legislation, and other things, you're really restricted in what you can do with youth. So the manner in which homeless youth are administered to isn't quite right, but it's a survival requirement. Recognizing that these people are run off their feet, especially in the emergency shelters at nighttime, and that there was nothing for the daytime, we've just, in the last two or three weeks, opened a day shelter, which is an area where people can gather and also get assistance and recommendations and food and coffee and those types of things.

● (0945)

Ms. Dona Cadman: Are there programs for them, health-wise and maybe for mental health problems, or anything like that?

Mr. Gordon Van Tighem: There are programs. The challenge there, though, is that we live in a country where everybody has rights and freedoms, and they need to choose as well, so it's a matter of encouraging healthy choices and providing the avenues to them.

The Chair: Go ahead, Ms. Wilson.

Ms. Catherine Wilson: As I said before, even the programs that are there to support poor people are all in trouble—all the programs. We are short-staffed. Nobody provides money for programming, like counselling services, within those programs to help the clients we serve. Every one of those programs is running in a massive negative, you see. Even the supports, as soon as they are supposed to be helping the poor, are not doing well. You can sense our sense of urgency on this issue. Everything is crumbling around us and there's nothing we can do.

So it is very timely that you are here. I'm hoping what we see here goes beyond putting things together, into action, because action is what has been lacking all these years, and that's what I know I'm pressing for—action—to relieve some of these things that are going on up north here.

The Chair: Go ahead, Gordon.

Mr. Gordon Van Tighem: I mentioned the facilities that are available, and Kate has urged me to also note that while these are in place, we are constantly searching for more resources for them and constantly requesting more programs. From the municipal level, this is outside of our mandate, so it's a matter of influencing the territorial and federal governments to improve their programs and program funding.

The other thing is it's also, as I mentioned earlier, a growth area. If the facilities are in place, it's like the *Field of Dreams*—"Build it and they will come"—and they come, and the need becomes greater. The urgency is there. Don't let me understate that.

The Chair: I'm just going to ask a couple of questions before I turn it back over to Mike, and maybe to Gordon, Ben, or Kate. I come from a rural community in southwestern Ontario, and it by no means has the kinds of issues you people have to deal with. Our challenge is being good corporate citizens who have the ability to also give. My question, just for my curiosity's sake, is this. You have three major mining operations. What kinds of citizens...?

I realize this could be a bit of a double-edged sword in terms of a question, but I also sit on the trade committee, and we talk about our companies being good corporate stewards around the world. My question is how you feel they help contribute. I realize it's not necessarily their area of responsibility to be dealing with housing issues, but how do these corporate citizens work in your case?

Part of what we heard in Whitehorse was there were just not a lot of businesses that can help. I ask that question.

Mr. Gordon Van Tighem: In our situation, from my experience, we live in an area that prospers under cooperation and co-existence. It's very much on a traditional basis. The mining companies you mentioned have come to the table, to a great extent. One of the first things identified was that it would be far better to employ local people rather than flying them in and out. So several of the mines have contributed to secondary level pre-trades programs at the high schools, and there's a program there.

When we talk about housing, especially with homelessness, the BHP Ekati mine funded the study that led to our day shelter and has contributed operating money through the first three years of its operation, partnered with health and social services in the city, to the extent of providing some useful work activities.

The men's shelter I mentioned—the project manager was the Diavik diamond mine. We put up an $8.6 million building for $5.2 million. The balance of that was community donations, contributions from the mines, and it was a massive community opportunity. As I said before, the community really comes behind things. The De Beers mine has been active in the educational program and in a number of other things.

At the back of that, all of those mines have a pre-negotiated impact benefits agreement with the aboriginal communities they're impacting, so they're flowing significant dollars into those communities as well.

From my experience, the mines have put an ice pad into the arena in Coppermine/Kugluktuk. They put one in Lutsok'e. They're currently doing some work in Betchico. They've assisted us in putting together our territorial dementia centre here, which was home care or a hospital psych ward before. Also, they came in and assisted with the second phase of our multiplex hockey arena and allowed it to come in on budget and two and a half years early. So from my perspective in dealing with them, they've been very much a part of the community.

● (0950)

The Chair: Thanks.

Go ahead, Ben.

Mr. Ben McDonald: I don't want to bad mouth the corporations because they do a lot of good work, but I think I'll make a couple of points, if I may.

In the first instance, to give you an idea, the first diamond mine that opened up here, during its first year of operation, made a million dollars a day. It paid off the capital investment in the mine in something like two and a half years. So the diamond mines were fabulously wealthy.

At the same time as these mining corporations were as wealthy as they were, corporate taxes were falling. I think what that does—and it troubles me, and it troubles the people in Alternatives North. Why should a corporate board of directors be deciding whether there will be a recreation facility in Kugluktuk? I'm glad they put the money into it; I'm glad they put the money into the arena in Yellowknife, the dementia centre, and all the other projects they're doing, but we shouldn't be delivering those sorts of services based on corporate charity. There should be a reasonable tax regime put in place, and elected officials should make the choice as to where that money is being spent.

It's clear that the mines have the resources to invest in these sorts of things, but I think we have it a little backwards as to who decides public policy. It should not be corporate boards of directors; it should be elected governments.

The Chair: Thanks.

The reason we've addressed that is because we've heard in some places that everyone is working together, not necessarily building arenas but as an active part of the poverty strategy, and that's why I was curious as to what was going on here. Thanks.

We have time for one more round.

Mr. Savage.

Mr. Michael Savage: I want to come out of here with some very specific recommendations, as specific as possible, appreciating where you're coming from. Certainly, you indicated the RInC program—$187,000 for the territory. The average cost of a house is $300,000, so you're not going to get a lot of recreation complexes out of that.

Mr. Gordon Van Tighem: We might get three curling club compressors in three different communities.

Mr. Michael Savage: One of the groups of people who are most marginalized, the groups that have the highest incidence of poverty—we have aboriginal Canadians, lone-parent families, but persons with disabilities do not do well in Canada compared with some other countries that are at equal or lower wealth levels than Canada. One of the ideas that's been discussed in the last few years—it was discussed by the Caledon Institute, and Campaign 2000 talked about it—is a basic income system for persons with disabilities.

Ben, you talked about a guaranteed annual income. Our colleagues in the Senate have done a report on poverty as well, and one of their recommendations is going to be to start off with a basic annual income for persons with disabilities, sort of based on a combination of OAS and GIS for seniors, to provide a basic annual income for the disabled. Would that be something that would make sense? It must be more difficult for people with disabilities in the north than in other parts of the country, when you look at temperature and road conditions and getting around and everything else. Would that be a good start?

Mr. Ben McDonald: Yes, I think that would be.

Following up on a question Ms. Cadman raised, one of the priority areas the federal government should be looking at, if we're going to deal with poverty, is to deal with existing programs and try to up the amount of money in the hands of people who don't have the money. We can define it in various ways: unemployed people, disabled people, there might be women's programs, children's programs. Raising the level of support in those programs that put money into the pockets of the lowest-income people should be the priority. Certainly disabled people in the Northwest Territories and across the country are in desperate shape. I've heard statistics like 90% unemployment. It's clearly the case in the Northwest Territories that disabled people cannot fend for themselves because they can't find jobs.

The Government of the Northwest Territories changed its policy in the last year to give access to the income security programs. It was based on the premise that you had to be looking for a job. They took seniors and disabled people out of that. That automatically gave them a $200-a-month increase. There are people who are still living a hand-to-mouth existence in many cases, but that's the sort of thing that could be done very quickly.

● (0955)

Mr. Michael Savage: I'm glad you raised that, because some things may be mid-term or longer-term goals for poverty, but there are things that the government, specifically the federal government, can do right now on the child tax benefit, for example, which has done some good in reducing child poverty, and on OAS, and particularly GIS. All they need is a decision to invest in those vehicles right now. So you would support increasing the amount of money that flows into those vehicles right away?

Mr. Ben McDonald: Absolutely. Those are the sorts of things that can be done while we're trying to get the bigger anti-poverty strategy in place.

Mr. Michael Savage: Exactly right.

The Chair: Go ahead, Kate.

Ms. Catherine Wilson: That'll be great if it can be increased, but we have a system of income security that claws back almost half that money, and then what good is it?

Mr. Michael Savage: I think we mentioned earlier that has to be part our report. We have to deal with how clawback happens in any social program the federal government administers. That has to be dealt with, or it's obviously just defeating the purpose.

Ms. Catherine Wilson: Yes. Right now that's causing a lot of issues for families. The universal money they get is totally clawed back. A family can have the rent paid in normal times; as soon as they get the GST or the universal...which should put them a little bit ahead, it's clawed back and they end up owing.

Mr. Michael Savage: The universal child care benefit, the alleged child care allowance, that's clawed back?

Ms. Catherine Wilson: It's clawed back here, yes.

Mr. Michael Savage: Is it?

Ms. Catherine Wilson: Yes. So is the GST; it's clawed back.

Mr. Michael Savage: The GST rebate. Okay.

And there was a quick mention of early learning and child care. That's a need here, obviously.

Mr. Ben McDonald: Alternatives North's website is www.alternativesnorth.ca. We've done a child care study, and this issue is referred to there. But child care is a huge reason for being out of the workforce, especially women.

Mr. Michael Savage: Thank you.

Ms. Catherine Wilson: There is one recommendation I'll give, though.

In my years of working here, I've seen that most moms would rather stay home and take care of their children. But if you are a single mom and you choose to do that, then you are doomed to be on income support for a long time. It's so hard to get out of that system, because if you decide to go to work, then you have to pay your child care and everything else. But if, say, the single mom with three children decides to work and gets a minimum wage, the child subsidy will give her some money toward day care, which is not enough, but it's something. And that day care or that day care provider would take care of the children while she goes to a minimum-wage job, while all the mom wants to do is stay home.

Is there any way that mothers can be given some money so that they can stay home and take care of their children, instead of farming them out to day homes where children are being taken care of by other people and given other people's values and stuff like that? We need to look at these things, because these children are our future. This world right now is theirs in 20, 25 years. What can we do to help families so they can raise their children in a good way, instead of everybody leaving, going to work, and children being farmed out to somebody else? That's something I would recommend that you look into.

The Chair: Thank you.

Do I have any final comments from either you, Mr. Lessard, or Mr. Martin? We're pretty much coming up to 10 o'clock, but we do have a little bit of time.

Mr. Lessard, do you have a final comment? Go ahead, sir.

● (1000)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Yves Lessard: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Certainly when we talk back and forth with you, we exchange messages because we want to have to make recommendations. Ms. Cadman asked what could be done. Means were already put in place. I know that Ms. Cadman was not here at the time.

When the Conservatives came to power, an agreement worth $5 billion over five years had been signed in Kelowna with Canada's First Nations for Aboriginal communities. The first thing the Conservative Party did was cancel that agreement. I know that Ms. Cadman is not responsible for that, but it's her party. That is a message we have to get across immediately, because in a few days we will have to talk about means.

Mr. Dryden had also laid groundwork for daycare. One of the first things the Conservative government did was destroy that groundwork. Mr. Dryden's approach addressed some of Ms. Wilson's concerns because it also included a component to support women who chose to stay home. I am not saying that to make matters worse, but to get an accurate reading of what constitutes real political will to turn things around in terms of poverty.

I would now like to address you, Mr. McDonald. You pointed out that there was a unionization problem here. I believe I understand that labour relations that fall under two levels of government—like elsewhere.

Are you talking about federally regulated or provincially regulated employers? What is the nature of the unionization problem? I agree with you when you say that in order to improve working conditions, we often have to bring in unions.

I will be asking a question later about electricity.

[*English*]

Mr. Ben McDonald: Thank you. I'll first address the issue of the money that was allocated for first nations development and just draw attention to the fact that often in the Northwest Territories we run into problems on national programs because much of that money often goes through reserves, and we only have one reserve in the Northwest Territories. Most of the Inuk people in the Northwest Territories either are with unresolved treaties or have a separate treaty that does not create reserves—they have a self-government regime.

So if I could ask you, when you're developing programs that are addressing the needs of aboriginal people, keep in mind the fact that money can't only be flowed through reserves, if we're going to address that. I think it's comparable to off-reserve people living in the cities, but there are special problems, I think, when it comes to that if solutions are being sought.

The way the territorial governments operate when it comes to labour legislation is that the governments are permitted to take onto themselves, with the permission of the federal government, responsibility for certain areas. In the Northwest Territories the territorial government has not taken over responsibility for labour, so the Canada Labour Code applies to everyone here except public employees, teachers, and a few people that are specially designated with their own piece of legislation.

From the perspective of the national jurisdiction that comes in labour organizing, I acknowledge that there would be difficulties in dealing with it in many places. That would not apply here. Any improvements in fostering a more labour/union friendly climate at the federal level would directly apply to virtually everybody in the Northwest Territories.

The Chair: Thank you. I'm always sometimes leery when I get the last question, as I just did there.

Tony, do you have a final comment?

Mr. Tony Martin: I'm good.

The Chair: Then I'd like to take a second to thank our witnesses again. We appreciate you taking time out of your busy schedules to be here and to talk to us about some of these pressing needs.

Do you have any final comments before we head out?

Gordon.

Mr. Gordon Van Tighem: Just with regard to the comment about electricity, we are in the midst of an electrical pricing review. All of the communities in the territories are subsidized down to the Yellowknife rate, which is probably ten times that of Saskatoon. They're looking at ways to change it. Our fight now is to ensure that the changes introduced don't fly in the face of more competitive rates, such as those in Fort Smith and Hay River.

The biggest challenge with any utility, as you noted in comparing your riding with here, is that we have very few people to spread the expense over, and some of these things are very expensive.

As you move on, a common theme I've heard, both in the Yukon presentation yesterday and from all of us here, concerns the invitation to consult. Involve the people you will be dealing with in your discussions, but more importantly, once you have consulted, find a way to have their comments included in the recommendations that come forward.

I flew back from Inuvik one day and got into a discussion with a young lady who had made a very interesting dietary selection on the plane. I learned that she was from Health Canada. She had spent six months among the Inuvialuit people, working on an elder home care program concerning what would work within their culture. They had put together a package involving the people from all of the Inuvialuit communities. She went back to Ottawa, made her presentation, and was advised that nationally they would be using a model based on the Hurons.

When I was flying with her on the plane, she had just gone back there to tell these people, who had spent six months coming up with something that would work in their region, that they weren't going to be able to do it and that the program they were being given was actually counter to a lot of the things they had talked about.

So if there is a way of customizing as this goes through, that would be excellent. Please keep this in mind.

Ben alluded to this a bit. We have some unsettled land claims—treaty land entitlement initiatives and self-government initiatives. Anything that could be done to move them forward more quickly... If you go into the regions that are settled and that have self-government, you will see a quantum leap in knowledge, in pride, and in the activities in the communities. Anything to motivate the last two or three that remain to be done would certainly help our activities here.

Thank you very much for coming. We look forward to seeing what your report brings.

● (1005)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We're going to suspend now, until 10:30.

● _____ (Pause) _____ ●

● (1030)

The Chair: We're going to get back now to our study of poverty. I want to thank all our witnesses once again for being here today.

We have been doing this study for the last year to a year and a half across the country, in eastern Canada, in Ontario, and of course we've come west. It was suggested that we come north, and am I ever glad that we have come north. It's been interesting to see some of the different nuances.

We realize poverty is an issue across the whole country, but it's amazing to see... Those of you who are here could have told us that and are telling us that, and we appreciate what we've been learning since we've been up here. We were in Whitehorse yesterday, we are in Yellowknife today, and we will be in Edmonton tomorrow. We were in Vancouver on Monday.

I'm going to get started.

Michelle, we're going to start with you and we'll move across the witness table. We'll hear all your testimony and then we'll have some time for questions and answers.

You have translation here. Mr. Lessard will be speaking in French, and audio translation can be selected. I will take time to ensure that you have a chance to get your headphones on before Mr. Lessard starts, when we do our questions.

I'll wave at you when you're getting close to your seven minutes. If you're not done, I'll certainly let you finish your comments. Then, once we've heard all the witnesses with their opening remarks, we'll have a chance for the MPs to ask some questions around the room and follow up what you had to say.

Once again, thank you for being here today. We look forward to hearing you.

I'm going to turn the floor over now to Michelle Gillis. You have seven minutes; the floor is all yours.

Ms. Michelle Gillis (Executive Director, NWT Council of Persons with Disabilities): Thank you.

Mr. Chair, did you also want me to go through the recommendations I've made or...?

The Chair: Most definitely. We're here specifically for recommendations. If you want to, please give us some quick background. You represent the Northwest Territories Council of Persons with Disabilities, so you may want to talk a bit about your organization, and then you can get into the recommendations.

● (1035)

Ms. Michelle Gillis: Okay. As you said, my name is Michelle Gillis. I'm the executive director of the NWT Council of Persons with Disabilities.

Ours is a non-governmental organization. It is a territorial council that serves all persons with disabilities, right across the north. At present, the majority of our funding comes from a contribution agreement through the territorial government, private foundations and grant moneys, as well as fundraising.

We have a number of programs and offer a number of services, including a 1-800 number, a parking placard system, and community outreach. Right now we're in the process of creating some new programs for our new fiscal year, which begins on April 1.

I'm new to the position as of September, but I'm a lifelong northerner. I am originally from Cambridge Bay, Nunavut.

Our organization is run by a board of directors that is representative of people throughout the NWT.

Thank you, committee members, special guests, and stakeholders, for giving me the opportunity to address your organization today on this very important matter.

The NWT Council of Persons with Disabilities has a large clientele, with many different types of disabilities, right across the north. We provide information and assistance to whomever may require it.

Our mission is to achieve self-determination and full citizenship for persons with disabilities. We do this by promoting awareness, opportunities, choices, and participation in all aspects of life in the Northwest Territories.

I'd like to begin with the words of a participant at the Feeding Change forum held in Ottawa, Ontario, in 2007, who said that the poverty of aboriginal people may be better addressed by righting inequality rather than focusing on poverty itself, which could be a symptom of inequality.

This is very much the same for persons with disabilities. At present, persons with disabilities do not receive the same opportunities as other people and are, for the most part, low income, impoverished, or a paycheque away from poverty. This is very sad. People with disabilities lack enough income to properly cover the burdens of a disability.

Increased health care costs and prescription coverage, mobility aids, adaptations to the home and workplace, as well as other essential items, in addition to their regular living expenses, make it almost unbearable. People with disabilities have so much more to worry about, and the majority face poverty because of the inequality surrounding their disability.

In terms of the right to education, work, and a livelihood, we as a country and a government are not ensuring that persons with disabilities are getting a proper education right from kindergarten. We're not allowing each person in Canada the right to education. In the north, we are very remote and lack educational resources. People have little or no access to public spaces and institutions. We're setting up our people for failure later on.

How do we as Canadians expect people to look after themselves when we do not even give them the opportunity to educate themselves and become self-sufficient? We need to encourage our government to ensure that all persons have the right to education, the right to live and play in all areas, and to grow and flourish.

Children with disabilities often require a higher level of care, which can create increased stress for a family and can mean families must sacrifice school and work opportunities to provide the necessary level of caregiving. Parents who cannot work or go to school because of the extra demands of having a child with a disability may be more likely to experience poverty, which can affect the health and well-being of their children and themselves, as well as threaten the stability of the family unit.

Providing proper support to parents who have children with disabilities can increase the strength and capacity of families, decrease burnout, and allow other family members to access employment and educational opportunities. All of these things are essential in breaking the cycle of poverty for a family.

The other issue, which is a very important one, is the issue of the working poor. This relates to those who do have a good job, but because of the extreme cost of their own or their family member's disability, in addition to the high cost of living, are actually below the poverty line. This also makes them ineligible for social programs, as the government usually only considers income levels and not the circumstances or the related expenses.

● (1040)

So perhaps a review of government program eligibility criteria is a good idea.

Poverty often creates secondary disabilities in addition to the primary one. For example, an individual cannot work because of a primary disability and cannot afford groceries. He becomes malnourished and develops a whole host of secondary disabilities.

People need to adjust their perceptions, as well as provide opportunities for persons with disabilities. Persons with disabilities are shut out of everyday opportunities because people are looking at their disabilities instead of their abilities.

When people do not access these vital tools, they become welfare recipients. Even worse, they may end up homeless, in jail, or even, sadly, dead. When persons with disabilities end up living off social assistance, they already have higher expenses to account for, but they are not always given the opportunity to find their niche.

It is assumed, due to ignorance, that because individuals have disabilities, they have nothing to contribute. Our clients end up barely getting by and being hungry because their system has failed them and hasn't trained them for the normal workforce.

Everyone has something to contribute. We just have to change the way we think and provide these opportunities to everyone regardless of disabilities. Let's not discriminate; let's amend our present workforce to account for these part-time positions or adapted positions to help employ disabled persons.

On affordable and accessible housing, all across the country people are in poverty because of the national housing crisis. The worst housing conditions are within aboriginal communities. The lack of affordable and accessible housing is a reality for people with disabilities. If people are lucky enough to gain housing, it is often substandard housing that they have to accept and there are no alternatives.

Often low-income housing is used for persons with disabilities and not properly adapted for them. Housing without proper adaptations can cause accidents or death among the disabled. People often don't leave their homes because of worry about falling or injury. They often don't bathe as much as they would like because of unsuitable washroom facilities, and they are more prone to infection because of this.

Because of the small number of homes that are available, people most often live with other family members in order to make do. Often the disabled are then taken advantage of and even sometimes abused.

When there is overcrowding and hidden homelessness in the north, you have sexual abuse, incest, and other violent situations. This is no different for people with disabilities, as they are often fragile or in a vulnerable state. We owe our communities the opportunity to have adapted housing but also, for the privacy of individuals, the right to independent living.

On affordable food and necessities, at present the cost of food is a huge problem for people in the north. The federal government has implemented programs to help assist with this cost. However, the savings are not being passed on to the customers in many different communities. Suppliers or retail outlets often take advantage of these savings, and at present they are not mandated to pass these savings on to the consumer. Individuals who are low-income and/or on welfare are the people who need to get the lowest prices. However, not having luxuries like credit cards makes it impossible for people to take part in these programs.

Essentially, the people who need this program the most don't benefit at all. Persons with disabilities have extra cost burdens, in addition to food and shelter. Factor in medical costs and prescription drugs and this makes it impossible for someone to survive from day to day. This is the very reason why there is malnutrition. In each community across the north, access to food banks has increased and more and more people are fighting to get food on the table each and every day.

In summary, how do we break this cycle? It is simple. Ensure that persons with disabilities are treated equally and have the same rights and freedoms as each and every other Canadian. In this way they can make lives for themselves so that they can teach their children to contribute to society.

Let's make training and employment opportunities for persons with disabilities. We also need core funding for vital social programs, like the Council of Persons with Disabilities. Let's adapt our buildings, schools, and public spaces so that all persons can take part in daily activities. But let's also adapt the way we think as a society.

People are often discriminated against or not supported simply due to ignorance. This will ensure that people learn, work, and apply themselves. It will also ensure that those persons who absolutely need social programs are able to access them. Let's help people help themselves.

● (1045)

Just because someone is disabled does not mean he or she is not capable; all persons have abilities. This will not eliminate poverty, but it will help reduce it. We must start somewhere.

If I could, I'll go through the recommendations, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Sure, but be quick.

Ms. Michelle Gillis: The recommendations are: provide educational resources for home schooling; provide adaptations to the classroom when required; make all public spaces accessible for daily living; provide proper instruction for those who are disabled; provide more accessible and affordable housing; provide funding to adapt washrooms and living spaces to accommodate the disabled; make changes to the current welfare system so that it is a work-to-earn system in whatever form people can provide assistance to society—it may not be your typical understanding of what work might entail; have the government verify, through a complete audit, that persons on welfare actually deserve it and are in need of it—this will free up money for those who actually need social assistance; a thorough review of the territorial supplementary health benefits and national non-insured health benefits system; ensure that those benefits are actually helping those whom it is designed for—this also means a complete review of the approved medication list for NIHB.

To continue with the recommendations: more shelters need to be created in the north, as very few exist and there is overcrowding; a thorough action plan needs to be designed to help abolish poverty, and let's look at what other northern regions have done and create something for the NWT; support services are required for families who have children with disabilities, such as respite care, community level supports, and day care that accepts children with disabilities; there should be a complete review of government-subsidized programs for persons with an income who are ineligible for assistance but in dire need of it

Thank you, Mr. Chair, for allowing me to make this presentation.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Gillis.

We're now going to move to Arlene Hache from the Yellowknife Women's Society.

Ms. Arlene Hache (Executive Director, Centre for Northern Families, Yellowknife Women's Society): Thank you very much for allowing me to participate in this panel.

I want to begin by describing who I am and who I work with. I came to Yellowknife in 1974. I was hitchhiking and homeless and I came to Yellowknife, basically trying to escape violence and incest in my own home, and I ended up in a great place called the north.

As I became more a part of the community and recovered from all the trauma related to living that kind of life, I worked with my peers and my friends and we established a centre that was designed to support other people in the very same living conditions and to support families who were struggling.

I want to explain a little bit about who we are so you have a picture of that, and it doesn't focus on statistics. The Centre for Northern Families is celebrating our 20th year this year. Over the past three years, 3,500 families have come to the centre each year to access a broad range of programs that are supportive. The majority of participants who come to the centre are aboriginal—50% are Inuit, 30% are first nations, and 5% are Métis. About 10% are immigrants and new Canadians and members of visible minorities.

The women who come to the centre create a collage of personalities that reveal strength, courage, compassion, and humour. They're very committed to their families. They have a keen sense of community within particular cultural contexts. It's different for not just every nation, but actually for every community.

They have a strong spiritual base, and it reflects an underlying sense of interconnectedness and responsibility for each other and caring for each other. The women and the families who come to the centre are actually pretty incredible people who are often cast in a different light. Most of the women are marginalized, and they struggle with a whole range of challenges, including making the difficult transition from small communities to an urban place and making the transition from another country to Canada or to Yellowknife.

Many of the women and families suffer the impact of trauma related to colonization and ongoing oppression around racism, systemic discrimination, and family and community violence. Some of the impact of that trauma shows up in addictions, psychiatric illnesses, family breakdown, poverty, illiteracy, and homelessness. The intergenerational result of residential school systems have also impacted family dynamics, particularly as it relates to gender relationships and parenting styles.

Generally, women who come to the centre are unlikely or unable to access other community resources, particularly if they have really rigid expectations or eligibility requirements, or if they have consequences for not functioning in a way people expect them to, or if they have consequences for not functioning in a way that is acceptable to those services.

I want to focus in just a little bit, because part of the work we do at the centre is to run an emergency shelter. When I first came to Yellowknife I stayed in an emergency shelter, so that particular group of women are really closest to my heart. Women living in the emergency shelter and in transitional housing tend to be at the more extreme ends of trauma. They range in age from 18 to 67 years old, and four of them are elders who essentially live there. Many of them have lived there for many years. One of them actually was on the radio yesterday talking about having been at the centre for six years.

Most of the women have partners and children, but they're not living with them. Many of the children have been apprehended by child welfare systems. Most of the women suffer from some type of mental illness, including post-traumatic stress disorder, suicidal ideation, and clinical depression. Four of the residents regularly experience auditory and visual hallucinations. The majority of residents use substances, including alcohol, street drugs, prescription medication, and hair spray. Several are chronically addicted.

● (1050)

Women are sometimes directly discharged from the hospital to the centre, and they flip back and forth between services. Other women are not admitted at all to the hospital or psychiatric treatment centres. In fact, one of the women wasn't even admitted to a correctional centre. She was sent south, far from her home, because they said they can't accommodate her in the north.

Most of the women experience male-to-female and peer and street violence every day, and there are high levels of same-gender sexual assaults. Many of the women have partners, most of whom are violent, homeless themselves, or incarcerated.

Many of the women have resorted to violence to protect themselves, or they have become perpetrators of violence. Some are involved in criminal activity, including selling drugs, prostitution, petty theft, and vandalism. Several women have been incarcerated for crimes of violence against their partners.

Generally the women have experienced extreme levels of oppression from birth and therefore have not developed a strong internalized sense of self-determination. They have low literacy skills in English, which are necessary to work in the wage economy, and they have minimal financial resources, which leave them few options for economic independence.

They often are not eligible for subsidized housing units or income security benefits. Most of the women have children, but they have lost custody, though most children see their mothers through the centre.

There was a pan-territorial study on women's homelessness that covered the Northwest Territories, Nunavut, and the Yukon, and you might be interested in the outcomes of that.

Part of the outcomes indicated that every woman who was homeless—and there were a significant number—was in a state of overwhelming stress. They weren't only homeless, they had a whole range of challenges they were trying to address. Most had addiction problems. Almost all of them had unsatisfactory and complicated or conflicted relationships with income support, child welfare, legal aid, housing authorities, and landlords.

Most of them had chronic symptoms of trauma that were related to short- and long-term memory loss, the inability to retain information, and difficulty following instructions or understanding a step-by-step approach—those kinds of challenges prevented them from accessing welfare—or they were deemed to be obstructionist or not participating, or a whole bunch of negative terms like that. Most of them were disassociating. They were hypervigilant. They suffered huge grief reactions and long-term physical problems.

With the odd exception, people coming into Yellowknife are from smaller communities in the Northwest Territories and Nunavut. A large number of them are Inuit from Nunavut. Homeless women themselves estimate that there are between 300 and 500 homeless women in Yellowknife alone. If you look closely at the housing situation in the Northwest Territories and Nunavut, there are families who are grouped en masse into housing units, which has created some of the problems my colleague referred to around family violence and incest.

Homeless women have developed a broad range of coping skills; some of them are great and some are not so great. The most prominent need expressed by homeless women was to have somebody on their side. They don't often feel as if they have that. They feel very alone, and they feel targeted by society as bad women.

A major hurdle for service providers is the women's lack of understanding about the long-term effects of trauma, neglect, violence, poverty, addictions, brain damage, and degradation. Without a thorough appreciation of these factors, they can't get the types of assistance and services they need. Training information, core funding for support services, and resources to secure the safety of women are needed.

There are two clear things you might want to know about. One is the fact that in the Northwest Territories most of the housing is owned by the Government of the Northwest Territories, the NWT Housing Corporation. Women or families living in communities outside of Yellowknife don't have access to market housing; it's all owned by the government.

● (1055)

The governments of the Northwest Territories and Nunavut are exempt from expectations you would expect of normal landlords. For example, every time you rent an apartment in Yellowknife, your lease continues on forever. A landlord can't just up and boot you out just because they would like to. In the Northwest Territories, housing authorities and housing associations are exempt from that, and most of the housing authorities are entering into three-month leases with families to determine if they're good families or bad families. Once the housing authority makes that determination, they can oust you just because they've ended the lease. The only option for people to fight back and say, “I need a place” or “There's no reason to boot me out” is to go to the NWT Supreme Court.

It's very challenging for anybody to go into the Supreme Court to defend your right to have a home. The last time I was in the NWT Supreme Court there were 17 people from a small community who were being evicted. Not one of those people showed up, of course, because they don't even know what that is, and then to show up is pretty challenging.

Just as an observer in the court, I stood up and said, “I have no standing, but I'm worried because not one of these 17 families showed up to say, 'Don't boot me out of my home'.” And the judge said, “You're right, you have no standing, so sit down—but I'm worried too.”

There is a real challenge around housing in the Northwest Territories.

One of the big recommendations we're looking for is a national housing strategy that has a gender lens applied to it and has special considerations for looking at the north and the housing situation in the north, which is primarily controlled by the government.

The other thing you might be interested in is that this Thanksgiving we got a picture of a turkey in Arctic Bay. It cost $200 to have a turkey for Thanksgiving. The milk cost $13 for three litres. The price was dropped on the turkey when CBC phoned the store and said, “What's that all about?” All of a sudden the turkey cost $90.

So there's a huge challenge around food in the north. There's more of a freight allowance or freight subsidy for junk food and for alcohol and lots of other things than for food. Issues around nutrition/malnutrition are really critical in the north.

There's also an assumption that traditional food or the hunting lifestyle is going to sustain families, but that's really changed over the years. Not only has it changed because families have changed, but the animal patterns have changed, the caribou patterns have changed. We're really concerned about the perception that people rely a lot on traditional food or wildlife to supplement their food.

The other thing you might want to know is that the housing authorities, for example, charge $5,000 in Paulatuk for a shack with the wind blowing through it. That's $5,000 a month rent that they're charging families, and then they say they're subsidizing it. If you ever hear the government's position that in the Northwest Territories we have the best benefits in the world, it's because they're relying on that rent to say they are subsidizing northerners to a huge degree. The fact is the rent is based on how much the housing authorities or housing associations have in terms of what they need to operate. A housing authority can say they need so much money to operate, and they'll divide the cost of the units in the community, and that's how they come up with the rent. So it's really interesting, because community people don't actually get to say how much it costs to run that organization; they just get to pay for it.

The other thing you might be interested in knowing is that in Yellowknife—I can get a schedule of all of the fees—people on welfare get $5 a day for each child to feed their children. Each child or each person gets $5 a day to eat. That's pretty astounding when you're looking at a $200 turkey, I can tell you that. If anyone wants more details on exactly that challenge, I have those available. I just didn't want to get too much into statistics.

The final thing I would say is that I've been here for 34 years, and I've been working at the community level for 25 of those years. I've been through the changes around welfare, the welfare reform, when it began years ago. The first round of social reform or welfare reform had a devastating effect on northerners, who I believe entered a really inhumane period when the CAP disappeared. I saw it. I saw children who were malnourished, with their bones sticking through their skin. It was horrific to me to watch. I saw a change in the attitude around people who provided the service. Before, when CAP was there, people actually appeared to care. You could get some resolution to the fact that people should be treated humanely. After CAP disappeared, so did the compassion. It was like it came to a grinding halt. So some kind of framework around income security is really necessary.

● (1100)

I believe the federal government can't abrogate its responsibilities around housing and welfare by passing it on to the provinces and territories. The really critical thing that you need to understand here too is that in the territories there's a different relationship, especially for Inuit, first nations, and Métis people. They are at a disadvantage here because of the public government.

I'll give you another example. Fifty per cent of the children in care in Canada are aboriginal. In the Northwest Territories, 95% of the children in care are aboriginal. In the provinces, bands and first nations communities have band representatives who can go to court and say, “We have a stake in what happens to that child, so we're here to represent that child because they are a band member.” In the Northwest Territories there's no such thing. Every time federal money is announced for first nations, in particular, they forget there's a total northern population that they've left out of the equation. So it would be great to have a real look at the inequities around what's being experienced by first nations, Inuit, and Métis in the south, and what is happening in the north too.

I'll leave it at that and then answer any questions.

The Chair: Thank you, Arlene. You've given us lots to think about.

We'll move to Ms. Jean McKendry.

Thank you for being here today, Jean. You have the floor for seven minutes.

Mrs. Jean McKendry (Individual Presentation): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Good morning, Mr. Chair and members of this committee. My name is Jean McKendry. I'm an academic librarian at Kwantlen Polytechnic University, in Surrey, British Columbia. It is pure serendipity that I am here today, and thank you for letting me speak.

I'm visiting Yellowknife for 10 days to do legal anthropology archival research at the courthouse in Yellowknife and at the Prince of Wales Northern Heritage Centre, but my doctoral research at the University of British Columbia is about homelessness. When I was listening to the CBC Radio this morning, I heard about this committee and decided that I would stop in on my way to work.

I can't speak at all about the poverty issues in the north, but I'm aware of homelessness in other areas of Canada. My doctoral research at the University of British Columbia in the School of Library, Archival and Information Studies is what to do for homeless men in public libraries from an architectural point of view. In my doctoral research I've learned that homelessness costs Canadian taxpayers about $6 billion per year. I've also determined that about 0.5% of every community in Canada is homeless.

There are three stages of homelessness. First of all, there are the hidden homeless, and they don't want anyone to know they're homeless. They can survive for about six months. They do not go near the shelters or other homeless people because they are so stigmatized that their life is at this crisis. After about six months, these people will move towards availing themselves of the services at the shelters.

In my community in Surrey, British Columbia, most of the shelter beds are now occupied by the working poor. They get up in the morning and they go to work, but they don't have enough income to support themselves and their food and daily living costs and housing, so they live in the shelters. But after about two years of living in shelters, a lot of the people become the absolute homeless, and they're the people who we see on the streets pushing the shopping carts. They don't live in shelters. In Vancouver they're lucky because the temperature is warm enough that they can live outdoors most of the year.

In my community, in South Surrey and White Rock, I am one of the people who sit on the community board that looks into the issues of homelessness and housing in South Surrey. A lot of people are amazed that there are even homeless people in our community, but 0.5% of every community are homeless people. So in my community, in White Rock, British Columbia, I determine that there are about 100 people who are homeless, even though there are only about three people visually on the street who are absolutely homeless. We have to take into account all of the homeless, not just the visibly homeless.

After about two years of living in shelters, the absolute homeless stop using these services because they realize that there is no housing strategy and they aren't going to get housing, and they give up. And most absolute homeless people do not celebrate their fiftieth birthday. They die. And they have nowhere to die. They die on the street or in the parks or along a roadway. The number of homeless people who are dying in Vancouver is more than the average for the mortality of that age of the population. That's a separate issue.

What I also know is there's a disproportionate number of aboriginal people who are homeless all across Canada. Four per cent of the Canadian population is aboriginal, approximately, 4% to 6%, but more than 25% of the homeless are aboriginal. I kept asking myself why is this so disproportionate, and I kept looking for reasons why.

● (1105)

What I have determined is that there is a problem with the matrimonial property rights on reserves in Canada. I realize in the north the Inuit people do not live on reserves, but here's what happens on reserves in Canada. There is a certificate of possession that has to be signed from the band office for anyone who lives in housing on the reserve. One signature goes onto that certificate of possession, and if a marriage breaks down, which is more common than off reserve, it is usually the mum and the children who leave the matrimonial home. The matrimonial home goes to the person whose name is on the certificate of possession, and the family members who are not on the certificate of possession are often evicted from the reserve and they leave the reserve with no child support, no equal division of property. There is nothing for them, and they are the next generation of homeless children. They go with their mums, and in the Lower Mainland, they end up on the downtown east side of Vancouver. Those are the aboriginal mums who end up as prostitutes. Those are the mums who ended up, a lot of them, the victims of the Pickton fiasco we had in Vancouver. I know this sounds a little bit embellished, but it's not.

The Indian Act also has a clause in it that says wages cannot be garnisheed, which means children don't get child support. So there is a mum, probably with no high school graduation, who is trying to look after maybe up to three children, and she is under age 21 in Vancouver trying to survive. It's a really tough life. I wouldn't wish that on anyone. Nobody wants to be homeless.

Here's how this ties into my research. Literacy is fundamental for Canadian society to function. Being illiterate is a severe handicap, but it can be overcome. When I talk to people about my research, I don't tell them I am working on homelessness because it is so stigmatized. I just tell them I am working on a public health crisis, and that's what I believe homelessness is in Canada.

What has literacy to do with poverty and homelessness? I think it has lots to do with it. For example, without an address you can't get a library card at most public libraries in Canada. It's a fact that children who use public libraries do better in school and have a better chance of succeeding because they are literate. Public libraries in Canada are trying to be more inclusive and welcoming to the at-risk people in our communities, especially aboriginal children and families. But many communities in Canada do not issue library cards to families who live on reserves. This is true in my own community. The Fraser Valley regional library system, which serves from the Fraser River on the south side all the way up to Boston Bar, will not issue a public library card to a family that lives on a reserve because they don't pay property taxes. I think this is discrimination; if you can't pay property taxes, that shouldn't stop you from being eligible for a public library card.

To wrap this up, I would like to encourage everyone to encourage the Honourable Chuck Strahl, Minister of Indian Affairs and Northern Development, Federal Interlocutor for Métis and Non-Status Indians in Canada, to please pass Bill C-8, the family homes reserves and matrimonial interests or rights act. It has only had first reading, and that was last February. If that bill were passed, aboriginal women and children in Canada would have more opportunities to be independent and we would give them the same matrimonial property rights that the rest of Canada has enjoyed since the Divorce Act was enacted in 1968.

Thank you very much.

● (1110)

The Chair: Jean, thank you very much for your testimony.

We're now going to move over to Shirley Tsetta.

Shirley, welcome here today. The floor is yours.

Mrs. Shirley Tsetta (Individual Presentation): Thank you.

I'm originally from Ndilo, here in Yellowknife, born and raised. I'm here as a private citizen. I'm not here on behalf of my first nations. I am actually here to listen to Kate Wilson. I'm a social work student and Kate is my supervisor. I'm doing my practicum under her for today and then I go back to the homeless shelter at Alison McAteer House. As a student and as a first nations member of the Northwest Territories, I do see a lot of social issues in regard to first nations aboriginal people.

I want to talk a little bit about housing and the problems we see in our community.

In my community, in particular, and also in the surrounding Northwest Territories communities, we have a lot of problems with people not being eligible to move into social housing because of the criteria that's set. One of the eligibilities in order to get into social housing is based on income. A lot of the smaller communities don't have economic development or a lot of jobs. They would be eligible to move into social housing and they would get subsidized to live in social housing, but they won't be eligible to become homeowners. To be a homeowner, you would have to meet a certain wage level. So these people end up in social housing.

If they ever do get into a job, there's a level that's set by GNWT on how much rent would be assessed. I think it's 25% of the income that is taken for rent. A lot of the people can't afford that. They end up being in social housing, getting a job, and then getting their rent assessed at 25%. With the high cost of living in the remote communities, they end up having to leave their job just so they could stay in a subsidized unit. So that's a huge problem.

Also, if they were needing to get income support to help, they have to not be working. If they are working, then their income support gets taken away. The incentive now is to stay jobless or unemployed, because then you are eligible for subsidy and for income support. There's not a lot of incentive to go and work, especially because these people are not eligible to become home-owners. That's a huge problem in the communities. I think when Canada is giving money for housing in the Northwest Territories, it's based on a per capita basis. That doesn't work because of the high level of need in the Northwest Territories.

I just want to move over to education. We have a huge problem in the Northwest Territories with graduation rates. Although it shows there are a lot of graduates coming out of our schools in the Northwest Territories, because of that there is this thing called “certification of completion”. These students go through the grades and they can come out at the end of grade 12 with a certification of completion, but that is really just a social pass. It's not an actual diploma, a completion of a grade 12 diploma. Now, these students are not actually grade 12 students. If they want to move on to college or university, they are not eligible because they don't have that level of education.

● (1115)

Then they need to take what is called I think the university access program, and they need to upgrade in order to get into the program. The GNWT has put a cap on post-secondary funding—I think it's six years—so now these students who come out of grade 12 and who need to get into university are going to tie up their funding for the first year or the first two years just trying to get access into that program. So there's going to be a problem if that cap continues to stay in place.

The other issue I wanted to talk a little about was transportation into the communities. I think a feasibility study needs to be done to look at alternative ways to provide transportation into the communities. One of the alternatives I'm thinking of is the railway system instead of the actual highway system. If you go into the communities with the highways, then you're going to increase traffic and you're going to be bringing more vehicles into the north and more gas stations into the north. With our delicate ecosystem in the Northwest Territories, I don't know how long we could sustain that level of impact from vehicles and from gas emissions, so I would strongly encourage an alternative mode of transportation into the north, one possibility being the railway.

Homelessness in Yellowknife is a huge issue because of the people not being eligible to become homeowners. I think they need to teach these young kids who are in high school how to budget, and they're not teaching that right now. Maybe that can become part of the curriculum of high school.

I come from a generation in which my mom and dad never spoke English. They were hunters and trappers. My dad had a dog team, and I still have a lot of pictures of them. Both my parents are gone now. But just from their generation to my generation is a huge leap. My kids are getting into the wage economy, and that's their generation, but there's a huge push from our first nations to continue to keep our kids tied to the land and to the traditional way of life and their culture.

Even though there is a high demand for the wage economy to go up into the communities, I don't want to impose anything on them that they don't already want for themselves. So if I'm making any recommendations that the wage economy has to go up in the community, I don't want that to be an imposition on them. I think they need to know that if the issue is that wages need to go up, then they need to determine that for themselves.

The wage economy is something that's just in my generation and my kids' generation. Before that, my parents were part of the traditional economy. Although that era of traditional economy is dying out, I think there's still a great need in our first nations to continue that way of life for our first nations people.

I think there's a great need for our first nations to be able to deal with their social problems. There are a lot of alcohol and drug problems in the communities, and we have one treatment centre in the Northwest Territories, in Hay River. We do have some counselling services here in the Northwest Territories, but if you want to take a 28-day program, you would have to go to Hay River or even outside of the Northwest Territories, further south.

● (1120)

Because of the high level of addiction problems in the Northwest Territories, I think more treatment centres are called for up here.

Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you, Shirley.

We're going to start with Mr. Savage, for seven minutes.

Mr. Michael Savage: Thank you, Chair.

Thank you all very much. Those were very interesting presentations, and we very much appreciate you taking the time to come.

My name is Mike Savage and I'm from Nova Scotia.

One of the key things that I think we need to nail down in our report is to take on the idea that some people still have, that as an economy grows, everybody benefits, that the best thing for the economy is that there is wealth generated. But we've found in Canada generally that even when times are good there's still poverty, and in some cases, poverty actually rises. It may be particularly true in Yellowknife, more than anywhere else in the country.

I'm looking at the average median annual after tax income of the five cities we're visiting this week. For private households, the average after tax income in Vancouver is $48,500; in Whitehorse, it's $58,000; in Edmonton, it's $54,000; in Winnipeg, it's $44,000; and in Yellowknife, it's $84,000. The GDP in the Northwest Territories rose 55% from 2001 to 2006, so there has been wealth generated, but it hasn't done anything to alleviate poverty. Food bank use is going up and the demand for shelters is going up, so I'm going to assume, unless somebody tells me otherwise, that you do, first of all, believe there is a huge role for government to play. In terms of direct income support, housing support, health support, community support, and support for education, direct government involvement is going to be necessary if we're going to alleviate poverty.

Does anybody disagree with me on that? I'd like a brief comment, if you could.

● (1125)

Ms. Michelle Gillis: I agree entirely with what you're saying. I'm new to the Council of Persons with Disabilities, but for 10 years I worked as mayor in one of the northern communities and lived my life in Nunavut and NWT.

One of the things I touched on was the working poor. It includes those persons with disabilities who are struggling to get by, who are often the first families to enter a shelter. There is hidden homelessness in the north, because many northern communities don't have shelters. We're lucky here in Yellowknife to be able to have a shelter. A new building actually just opened the other day, a day service, to compensate the Salvation Army and other locations.

But oftentimes the working poor are struggling to get by with the increased cost of fuel and utilities. You see the commercial from time to time with the roof coming off the house. You're always deciding whether you're going to be paying for your rent or paying for your food. She is deciding between a can of coffee and the rent. That is very true for people in the north. You're struggling to decide whether you're going to lose your house and move in with another family and risk incest, abuse, and other social problems. So you're always deciding what you can afford, because you can't afford everything.

They have income, but because rent is going up—there is no cap on rent in the private market—those people who are trying to escape social housing, who are trying to provide a life for themselves, who are trying to use their life skills to budget and to be able to create livelihoods, are working, but they're barely getting by. They're barely able to cover basic expenses. As soon as you add into that prescription medication and everything else, people don't have enough to survive.

Income levels are quite low. You try to use resources such as income support to compensate, but if you do have income coming in, you do not get income support. It's simply deducted from your income support. Oftentimes I think there is a higher number of working poor who are struggling to get by.

In terms of the issue with fuel—

Mr. Michael Savage: I just have a point on that. When the minimum wage is $8.25 per hour, and the average income is $85,000 for households, that's a huge gap between the lowest and the highest. With the higher cost of everything up here, and in your case the added burden for the people your association is dealing with—persons with disabilities—I don't know how you could possibly, conceivably, live in your own place.

Ms. Michelle Gillis: With positions opening up, let's say, in resource development and mining, so many families are coming in from the south, because they want to take part in the mining industry or otherwise. With the housing crisis the way it is right now, with the very limited rental units available, they're taking up these valuable housing units that become available, so landlords are increasing rents and maximizing.

There is no cap on what rents can be in the north. So rather than going to the rental market, you go to social housing. Unlike first nations reserves in southern provinces, where the band council can design the bylaws and decide the legislation, here we have GNWT rather than the Inuit and first nations telling us what low-cost social housing is going to be.

● (1130)

Mr. Michael Savage: Could I get to two points? We have a limited bit of time and I want to get at this issue.

Arlene mentioned that it's actually worse that the government controls the housing than it would be if it were private. Arlene, you were saying that. They're not subject to the same sorts of rent controls and conditions.

Ms. Michelle Gillis: I'll let her answer, but I agree, yes.

Ms. Arlene Hache: There are a couple of things that are really interesting about the north. One is that all the benefits from diamonds and all the economic activity in the north actually go to Ottawa first. Not only is the federal government responsible for setting the tone in terms of how Canadians are sort of equally treated related to resources, but I think in the Northwest Territories it's extra harsh, because none of that actually stays in the territories. It goes to Ottawa first. They decide what we get and what we don't get, actually.

It is interesting to me, because there was a lot of concern about the diamond mining and the oil and gas development and what the impact would be on the communities in terms of a lot of social disarray and all that kind of stuff. What I found really interesting was that people in the communities, lots of people, got jobs in the diamond mining and oil and gas industries. It created a certain level of pride. They went out and bought tons of stuff. In fact, in one small community I don't think there was one house that didn't have a few Ford trucks—those big Ford trucks. It was kind of interesting to watch how a whole community went from income support to Ford trucks within months. But now, three years later, they have to pay all that back. Now what we're having is whole communities, or lots of people in communities, owing money to what I call loan sharks.

In fact, we had an interesting court case the other day. The loan sharks, as I call them, went to court and said they wanted to take all these families' belongings, because they owed them money. The court didn't agree, because they had been charging illegal rates in the Northwest Territories.

It was just interesting to see how that influx of money really had a devastating impact three years down the road.

Mr. Michael Savage: I just want to get, specifically, to some recommendations.

Michelle, on persons with disabilities, one thing you mentioned was support for the Council of Canadians with Disabilities and the Association for Community Living. You'd want them both to be supported by government more strongly.

Ms. Michelle Gillis: Yes, both should be supported by government. Right now our organization does not have core funding. You'll find that both Nunavut and NWT do not actually have funded departments to deal with persons with disabilities. Currently the portfolio lies with health and social services. However, we don't have assigned core funding, whereas you'll find in the Government of Yukon they actually have a department of diversity.

Mr. Michael Savage: You need consistent core funding.

Second, I'm sure you're aware of the issue of a basic annual income for persons with disabilities that is being promoted by a number of folks—Campaign 2000, the Caledon Institute, Canada Without Poverty—based on what we've done for seniors in terms of combining the OAS and the GIS. You'd be in support of having a basic annual income, I'm sure, for persons with disabilities.

Ms. Michelle Gillis: I would, but one of the larger issues is Canada's definition of, and in particular the Government of Canada's position on, what a disability is. We deal with a number of clients who aren't just legally disabled. They have complex needs, special needs, and chronic illnesses.

Right now where we're having difficulties is with the Government of Canada's definition. Right now they're following the definition they use for CPP, and it's not inclusive. A lot of people become very sick, can't work, and then go directly to income support, because they have no income coming in.

The Chair: Thank you.

Did you have a quick point, Jean?

Then we're going to go to Mr. Lessard.

Mrs. Jean McKendry: Mr. Savage, your statistics are alarming, and I'm very concerned about the homeless being included in your statistics. Without an address, a homeless person can't vote. They probably aren't filing their income tax. Because they're not a cohesive social group, they don't have a spokesperson for them. I'm wondering if there's a missing portion of the population that's not reported in those statistics.

● (1135)

Mr. Michael Savage: I think you're entirely correct. We've seen that in places like Calgary, for example, where people have shown up at the drop-in centre and have no identification whatsoever. That's a very important point.

Mrs. Jean McKendry: Because of protection of privacy issues, we have no way of keeping track of homeless people.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Lessard, the floor is yours for seven minutes.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Yves Lessard: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

My name is Yves Lessard. I am from Quebec and I am a member of the Bloc Québécois.

I would like to begin by saying how admirable and extraordinary I find it that organizations like yours play a role that should normally be played by the government. I sometimes tell myself it is good that you are there, but in a way, that amounts to saying that the role is yours alone, but that is not the case.

When she described the situation, Ms. Wilson said she had the impression she was watching the genocide of part of the population. It is even more disturbing to see that to a large extent, poverty hits aboriginal communities even harder.

I reiterate that the federal government is responsible for aboriginal communities. The approach that is currently being taken is relevant, and your input is important. As far as the status of women is concerned, I think that we should rise up against situations like the one you are describing for us this morning. We should be horrified that such situations still exist today.

Ms. Hache, you spoke to us about the women who would come to see you at your centres. You said that they displayed courage and strength and often looked at their situation with a touch of humour.

Am I to understand that you do not encounter women whose courage is gone because of their situation? My conclusion from what you said is that some of those women will always go unnoticed. They have no contacts and no means and have even lost the ability to go where help is available. Is there any word about these women?

Ms. Gillis, we see that the gap between men's and women's income is quite striking. Men earn an average of $45,000, while the average for women is $34,000. I cannot imagine what the difference is for persons with disabilities who find a job, if they ever do.

● (1140)

[*English*]

Ms. Arlene Hache: Thanks for asking that question. The sad truth is we hear about those women often in their death. We had the death of a woman not long ago; her husband killed her. There was a 10-month warrant out for his arrest in a small community where there's no RCMP detachment and nobody bothered. The RCMP basically, in my view, didn't bother to pick him up. In my view, it wasn't that important to them.

In Nunavut and the Northwest Territories, the level of violence is extremely high against women. The level of targeted violence is at epidemic rates. Not long ago, we had a story about a woman whose husband had tortured her for three days. He put their children in a closet. He tortured her—literally for days—and then left the home and went to work, because that's fairly common.

Some of the women I know were asking why he wasn't charged with attempted murder. Why wasn't he charged with torture? The sad truth is he didn't intend to murder her; he just intended to send a message. That's how we often hear from women who are living in communities that don't have RCMP detachments. They are living in communities where there really is condoned violence. There really is sort of an underground message that you have a right to rape any woman you want, or do anything to any woman, because you have to teach her a lesson.

I'll just go through a quick court case that we had recently. Not to bore you, but the question is just so critical and not many people ask it. We had a court case where a woman went to work at a mine. You should expect to be safe in your workplace. But she went to work at a mine and a man from her community tried to sexually assault her three times at the mine site. She felt unprotected at the mine. She took it to the RCMP and the guy was charged. There really wasn't one person in her community who supported her. The MLA wrote a support letter for the guy. The chief wrote a letter of support for the guy. There was a medicine person in court for the guy. The pastor was there for the guy.

It is still kind of shocking, because there was me and the woman on one side of the court and the whole community on the other side. It's so important to understand that. I was trying to figure out what was going on, so I said to the people in the community that I know, “What's happening? How come this woman isn't getting the support?” They said, “Well, she's not getting support because she's a slut. That's what it boils down to.” And this is from women too. They said she was in a relationship with that guy. It's all about that. I went back to the woman and said, “Gee, that's what people are saying. Why is that?” She said she was never in a relationship with the man. He raped her when she was 13. Her oldest child is a result of that rape, and that's what they're calling a relationship. He would drive around in the community and tell her to get in his truck, and she did.

Not many people really look closely at that level of extreme violence that I believe is present in lots of communities—not just northern communities, not just aboriginal communities. But underground and underneath it all, I hear about those stories, pretty blatantly, and probably because I've lived here that long.

So when you're looking at economics and basic money and basic income... That's why I go back to the high level of trauma. It's never been studied, but I believe women in the north live in a war zone, and if you really looked at the level of post-traumatic stress disorder—which I believe is a disability—you would realize that women are ultimately immobilized here around post-traumatic stress disorder. They're cast as drunks who can't quite control themselves. They're really cast as something totally different from what they are. They need protection.

If you go back to the United Nations, the United Nations is making Canada accountable, in theory, for its failure to protect Inuit, first nations, and Métis women. Those women are not protected, and they're certainly not protected in communities in the north where there's no RCMP detachment. Even if there's an RCMP detachment, they're often not protected. So you can imagine how bad that is with no protection.

● (1145)

The Chair: Thank you.

Thank you, Monsieur Lessard.

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

Mr. Tony Martin: What we're hearing about this morning, in a very compelling and clear way, is the whole question of inequality and the role poverty plays in that. If you don't have the housing, if you don't have the money to get out or look after yourself, you're left in a position where you have no choices. That inequality is not something that just kind of evolves or happens. It happens because of sometimes bad public policy. Mike spoke to that.

This morning I read in the *National Post*—not a particularly left-wing newspaper—an article by Murray Dobbin, who suggested there has been a battle happening in Canada over the last 20 years over property rights and equality, and the property rights are winning. It seems to me this is also an issue in aboriginal communities.

He goes on to quote Statistics Canada, saying that in terms of that battle for equality, the poverty created has twice the impact cost-wise than all of the cancers that we experience in the country. He also said that the average life expectancy of women is 75, but 51% of the poorest women don't make it to that age. It is the same thing with men. The poorest men, at 25, lose seven and a half years of life versus the wealthiest.

That's what we're hearing. Yesterday in Whitehorse we heard some really compelling testimony about violence against women. It was just unbelievable, and we're hearing again today that women tend to be the most obvious and clear victims of all of this.

How do we get to equality? And how do we erase the poverty that leads to this inequality?

There were a couple of comments made, and suggestions. We focus very clearly...and we heard again here and yesterday about the very desperate circumstances that many aboriginal people are now forced to live in because of the way things have evolved. We come forward with suggestions of ways we might change life to make it better, and then we move aggressively ahead, with our ideology often sticking out, to do things that then become problematic to the environment.

On the whole question of matrimonial rights, yes, perhaps we should, but what we found in dealing with that bill when it came before Parliament was that the consultation that needed to be done with the parties involved wasn't done in a way that led us to believe that at the end of the day, what they were proposing—and it's always limited—would get us to where you would want us to get to, Jean.

We need to remember that in working with and doing things on behalf of aboriginal people, they need to be involved and engaged and consulted in the whole thing, or else it's not going to work. I think that's what Shirley said this morning, that if you don't sit down and talk with, engage, and work with... That's what some of the leadership of the aboriginal communities who spoke to us both in Vancouver and yesterday in Whitehorse said to us as well, that we have to include them. We have to talk to them and we have to engage... And I think it's the same thing with the disabled.

Ms. Michelle Gillis: May I comment?

Mr. Tony Martin: Yes.

Ms. Michelle Gillis: As an aboriginal person, I have to say, though, that aboriginal people are really tired of being consulted and seeing no change happen after that.

We just settled, in 1999, a Nunavut land claim. As a beneficiary, I have seen nothing. All the resources... Our community has been mined out. People have entered into employment, and then all of a sudden there are no jobs, vehicles are being taken back, and there are children with no money and no food on the table.

We've said what we want to see happen in the north. It's the same with finding shelter so that women have a safe place to go. We've said what we want to see happen, and we've said it over and over again. We want to design low-cost housing ourselves. We want to educate ourselves. We want to tell our young people to go to school. Graduation rates are increasing slowly over time.

We keep saying it, and nothing is happening. People are getting disappointed. It's like the residential schools all over again, with the government saying that this is how it's going to be and this is what's going to happen. Members are appointed to housing authorities, and they tell our communities how it's going to be. Why can't we design the legislation ourselves and tell our people to work for a living, care for themselves, and make lives for themselves?

I just wanted to add that.

● (1150)

Ms. Arlene Hache: I want to quickly point out that right now in Canada there are 9% more aboriginal, Inuit, and Métis children in care than there were during the residential school period. I wanted to raise, in terms of a real solution, something that I found very helpful. Consultation usually means leaders, not necessarily on-the-ground real experiences. Something I found very helpful was giving people the tools and the resources to document experiences on the ground, as a way of conveying back to decision-makers, whether aboriginal or non-aboriginal, what's happening in the communities, so as to get out of the heads of all the people who are not living there. I've found that having tools to document what's happening is really critical, and they're not available.

I think this is a real key.

Mrs. Jean McKendry: I'd like to add that I'd like to see evidence-based fiscal accountability on every native reserve in Canada. I have dealt with students at Kwantlen Polytechnic University who are aboriginal and who come to me and say, "I'd really like to become a nurse and go back to my community and help the people there, and I cannot get funding from my band." I question why, and they say they don't know why, but there doesn't seem to be a public fiscal accountability of the money that's spent on reserves.

I'd like to see it evidence-based. I want results.

The Chair: Thanks, Jean. You may be opening another can of worms that we're not here to talk about today.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Yves Lessard: It would be interesting to know why.

[*English*]

Mr. Tony Martin: Do you have any comment on that, Shirley, or just to wrap up?

Mrs. Shirley Tsetta: Just to wrap up?

My recommendation would be that they need to go more into home ownership in the communities than into social housing. Social housing is needed. I sit on the housing committee for my first nation, and there is definitely a need for social housing. But my recommendation would be that they go back to the program they had a few years ago called the home assistance program, the HAP program. The HAP program was one whereby the potential homeowners needed to put in just, I think, 20% sweat equity to help build the home and maintain it for five or ten years, and then it was theirs free and clear.

That program has been taken away, and now to become a homeowner is very restrictive and criteria-based. Many people can't meet the criteria. I would really like to see that home assistance program come back. As it is now, for the last three years we've never had a home built in my home community; we've had more social housing built in my community, and a lot of homeowners are getting very frustrated.

So I think the HAP programs needs to come back.

Thank you.

The Chair: Jean, I'm going to ask you to hold your thought for a second; we're going to turn it over to Dona. I have a question for you regarding homes, so I'll give you a chance maybe to respond when I ask a question.

Dona, the floor is yours for seven minutes.

Ms. Dona Cadman: Well, ladies, you've given us a lot to think about, and it's a very scary thought, what these women are going through.

Arlene, you mentioned the percentage of people who were going to your society and that you had 50% Inuit. Can you give me the others? I missed them.

● (1155)

Ms. Arlene Hache: It was 30% first nations, 5% Métis, and 10% are immigrants and new Canadians.

Ms. Dona Cadman: Okay, thank you.

It's rather disturbing, isn't it?

Jean, I'd like a clarification from you. You said there were three types of homelessness. One was the hidden and one was the absolute. What was your third?

Mrs. Jean McKendry: The middle portion is the sheltered homeless. People traditionally stay in shelters for from six months up to two years.

Ms. Dona Cadman: Okay. Thank you.

The Chair: Thanks, Dona.

I want to go back to you, Jean, in the context of consultation and Bill C-8, for any recommendations. There are obviously members around the table who will go back to their respective parties. What are your thoughts—and I realize it's your opinion, so it's as it relates to you—on what you've seen concerning the bill? Is it something you'd still recommend that we move forward on?

Speaking to Mr. Martin's point, is there a need for more consultation, in your opinion, on Bill C-8?

Mrs. Jean McKendry: Personally, I think it will fail unless there is consultation with the first nations communities. I don't understand all the issues around it, but I think that people in Canada who are not first nations would never give up equal matrimonial property rights, and I think first nations families should always be given the same as the rest of Canadians, because we're all Canadian.

I don't understand how there can be such a discrepancy in law. All I want is for things to be fair. I don't know how it's going to work out, but I always believe that grassroots opportunities make things happen.

The first nations have to buy into it.

The Chair: Okay.

Arlene.

Ms. Arlene Hache: That's why I talk a little bit about documenting. Consultations are pretty fruitless, from my experience, unless people are able to document what's happening in a community. That removes it from the garbage talk that goes on at the upper level. I don't know whether that's the proper way of saying it, but the fact is that women in the communities and on the reserves don't feel protected. They feel shortchanged; they feel at risk, and people who are talking for them find it really challenging, because there's no way for those women to document what's going on so that they can go to a meeting.

I've been at consultation meetings, I've been at tribal council meetings where the leaders are saying one thing and what is happening in the community is totally different. It's no different from our politics, actually. When I went to the United Nations, the Canadian government put forward evidence that just wasn't true. Our own territories produced evidence that said they had changed the policy around housing, but it really isn't true. They just played with words.

But on the ground the story is different. How do we as people in the communities document what's happening, and how are we able to put it forward to decision-makers, telling them not to play with words, that this is what's going on?

That's why I think consulting more is pretty fruitless work, I would imagine. And if you get into a fight among all those jurisdictions, you have a huge problem, in my experience. But it's really hard to ignore what women are saying on the ground, that they're experiencing this around housing on reserves. I had family on reserve as well—on reserve and off reserve.

I don't think it's sufficient to go to the leadership group. They're important; they need to be consulted. But they have been. Now I think women need to be consulted.

The Chair: Michelle, you had a quick comment. Then I'm going to turn it back to Mr. Savage for some closing comments.

Michelle.

Ms. Michelle Gillis: I just want to add to Shirley's comments about housing and support by Inuit communities and first nations groups. There definitely needs to be some sort of accountability. It is the same with Inuit organizations. They do not always have to table their financial statements. A lot of words are spoken, but there's not much action on that.

We have all these companies that are owned by Inuit. How do I or anyone else benefit from that as an individual? Is my skin colour being used for some ownership of some million-dollar company? How is the average person benefiting? Just like the persons with disabilities, I think the HAP program is an excellent idea. Inuit are very intelligent. It's the same with first nations. They can construct homes. They have been doing it for years. They can put in equity. It doesn't always have to be monetary, but having the support of the Inuit communities and the first nations groups—right now we're using up the rental housing that is there. People who need to be homeowners are taking up that valuable social housing. They're stuck in there because they're paying maximum rent on the rent scale and they have no money to save for a down payment on a house, so we are using housing that persons with disabilities or other people could be using. We need to change the way we think.

As for the matrimonial bill, some housing authorities in the Northwest Territories and Nunavut have already adopted a policy whereby if there is any violence in the home, any separation, the women and children automatically get the home, but unless we support this and the community supports it, women cannot stay in their homes while being ostracized by the community because they were abused. They get on an airplane with their last few dollars and end up in Arlene's hands. It doesn't matter if there is a policy. It has to be supported by the community or it's not going to work. They cannot stay in a community and be ostracized by the entire band or the entire community for standing up and saying they are not going to be abused, they are not going to be violated. A policy doesn't work unless it is supported.

Thank you.

● (1200)

The Chair: Thank you.

Jean.

Mrs. Jean McKendry: I'd like to mention that at Kwantlen Polytechnic University we have an aboriginal trades program and we have aboriginal students come from all across the province to be trained as carpenters, millwrights, welders, and other professionals. Then they go back to their communities with ticketed skills. It is hugely successful.

Two first nations communities that I know of have excellent social housing programs on the reserve. They are the Siksika Nation just outside Calgary and the Squamish First Nation in Squamish, British Columbia. Both of those communities are doing excellent work.

The Chair: Thank you.

I'm going to turn it over to Mike for a few last words.

Mr. Michael Savage: Thank you, Chair.

We added Jean and Shirley to our panel, which was great. It indicates the level of interest. I just met Dawn McInnis, who is in the back of the room. She is with the Canadian Association of Social Workers, and ideally we would have had her present. I did suggest I would read into the record some of her recommendations, if I could, Chair.

She was speaking about the federal role in anti-poverty. I will encapsulate some of this and perhaps we can take this as evidence, Dawn, as well.

The federal government has no official plan to combat poverty. Different organizations have proposed such a role. She references Canada Without Poverty and has argued for a rights-based approach with special reference to United Nations international agreements that speak to economic and social rights.

The National Council of Welfare, which we have heard from in Ottawa, has proposed four cornerstones to ensure lasting solutions: first, a national anti-poverty strategy with long-term vision and measurable targets; second, a plan of action and budget that coordinates within and across governments; third, a government accountability structure to ensure results and consult Canadians; and, fourth, a set of agreed poverty indicators.

It references Campaign 2000, who we've heard from, the 25 in 5 Network, calling upon the federal government to adopt a poverty reduction strategy with targets and timelines, dedicated fiscal resources, accountability, public reporting and consultation with those who have lived in poverty, and coordination with first nations and aboriginal communities. It references the Dignity for All campaign, which we have heard from, that was launched this year to eliminate poverty and build a socially cohesive country by 2010.

It also speaks about other work that has been done, some by parliamentary committees, one focusing on urban poverty and the other focusing on rural poverty.

Dawn, I thank you for bringing those to our attention, and we'll have that on the record.

Chair, thank you for your indulgence.

The Chair: Thank you.

And to our ladies here who presented today, thank you so very much. As I said, it's been enlightening to talk with people in specific communities about some specific issues. Once again, we appreciate those issues you've raised for us directly.

With that, the meeting is adjourned.

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