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Chair

Ms. Candice Hoeppner

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

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● (1530)

[*English*]

The Chair (Ms. Candice Hoeppner (Portage—Lisgar, CPC)): I'd like to call to order meeting eight of the Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills and Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities.

Good afternoon, everyone. We are continuing our study today on poverty and the federal contribution to reducing poverty in Canada. We are very pleased to have some representatives today from the aboriginal community. From the Métis National Council, I want to welcome David Chartrand, vice-president. Mr. Chartrand is from my home province of Manitoba.

It's great to have you here, Mr. Chartrand.

I'd also like to welcome Wenda Watteyne. Thank you for being here.

You can present for 10 minutes, Mr. Chartrand, and then we will have questions from the members of the committee.

Mr. David Chartrand (Vice-President, Métis National Council): Thank you, Madam Chair. I have a prepared text I will read from. It's not usually my style. I usually speak from the hip and ad lib my speeches, but for the record, and on behalf of the Métis National Council, I will read some segments on issues that we believe may be of help to this committee and at the same time will send a message on our priorities.

Thank you for inviting us to make a presentation elaborating upon what role the federal government should play in fighting poverty in Canada. Parliament and the Government of Canada have direct, specific, and substantial responsibilities to improve socio-economic conditions for aboriginal people, including the Métis—and I emphasize "including the Métis".

These responsibilities flow from a variety of sources, not just subsection 91(24) of the Constitution Act of 1867. There's also the responsibility to make the functioning of the Canadian economic union as successful as possible. A successful economy depends on productive, contributing Métis citizens. Canadians cannot afford, either nationally or in their regions and communities, to see Métis people lag behind. As taxpayers to both levels of government, we envisage a strong role for the federal government that goes beyond providing tax credits or reducing taxes for working class Métis Canadians.

These measures, as successful as they may be for some, do not go far enough for the Métis and the needs of the large number of Métis people who live below the poverty line. Many of the Métis people who live below the poverty line are either young families or families who have more than three children. It is interesting to note that the 20th anniversary of the unanimous all-party resolution in the House of Commons to end child poverty by 2000 has just passed. Yet according to the 2006 census, 32% of Métis children under the age of six were in low-income families, compared to 18% of non-aboriginal children. According to the 2006 census, 32% of young Métis children were living in families with three or more children, compared to 25% of non-aboriginal children. Métis children in rural areas were more likely to live in families with three or more children than Métis children in urban areas—39% versus 30%. Yet the percentage of Métis children living in low-income families was higher in urban areas than in rural areas—36% compared to 20%.

In 2005, the median income of the Métis in Canada was lower than that of the non-aboriginal population. Indeed, it was about $5,000 less than the median income of $25,955 reported for the non-aboriginal population.

The Chair: Excuse me, Mr. Chartrand. Could I just ask you to read a little slower so the translator can keep up with you?

Mr. David Chartrand: Sure. I will.

The Chair: Thank you. I will give you time to complete it.

Mr. David Chartrand: That's my Métis accent coming out. I read faster than I should be.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Mr. David Chartrand: I will slow it down, Madam Chair.

Across the country, the difference in median income between the Métis and the non-aboriginal population was widest in Alberta and in the territories. In Alberta, the Métis median income at $22,839 was about $6,600 less than that of the non-aboriginal population at $29,501.

We believe the federal government must move on two fronts. First, it must continue to expand skills training and post-secondary educational support for Métis people. Second, it must expand its support for Métis families for child care and for early learning supports like Métis head starts.

Métis governments have been delivering skills training and providing educational supports for Métis for the last 10 years. We have worked with many organizations over the years, including the Canadian Council on Learning. We agree with them that education and learning make individual Canadians and communities as a whole more resilient and better equipped to adapt to economic turbulence, and I'll quote from a statement:

> Evidence demonstrates that higher education and continuous skills training are protective factors during times of economic instability—such as we are experiencing today—and a competitive advantage during periods of relative stability... Conversely, less-educated Canadians are less employable. They receive less workplace training. They have lower incomes and little or no savings. They are more likely to lose their jobs and remain unemployed for longer periods of time.

Accordingly, we believe the federal government should continue to extend support for Métis governments to meet the skills training and educational needs of Métis people. This should include expanded supports for Métis with disabilities and for those persons who face multiple deficits in obtaining employment.

Métis governments should be provided with further support to assist Métis to obtain post-secondary education. As it now stands, the federal government does not cover the cost of post-secondary education for Métis students. Out of the federal aboriginal education funds, Métis students do not receive any. Métis government support for these funds is limited to providing funding for their last year of university out of our training dollars.

And what that is referencing—for people to grasp—is the aboriginal human resources development program. There is now a new program called ASEP, which has been approved by this government. In that particular program, if we meet all our targets and all of our interventions, any surplus dollars can be used in the last year of post-secondary education.

We lose too many students who cannot make it to the last year of their studies because of financial constraints. We recommend that Parliament build upon existing Métis bursaries and endowments and allocate funds so that every Métis in the country who can pursue post-secondary studies has the support he or she needs.

Our second major recommendation on the proper role of the federal government in fighting poverty focuses upon the need for the federal government to expand its support for Métis child care and early learners. It is now universally accepted that early learning supports, like Head Start, do make an enormous difference in improving educational outcomes later in life.

Simply put, it provides a better foundation for children to reach their potential. The federal government recognized this in 1990 in the establishment of the off-reserve Head Start program. While this program was very much welcome, and we commend the friendship centres, it has failed to meet the needs of the vast majority of Métis children within the Métis homeland.

Program developers bypassed Métis governments and implemented the program primarily through the friendship centres, which serve only a minority of the Métis population as a result of being located largely in urban centres. Moreover, the resources are too thinly stretched to meet the needs of the Métis population as a whole. Less than 50% of Métis children under age 6 had the benefit of an early learning environment.

Moreover, Métis do not have access to a child care component within the current aboriginal human resources programming. That, again, is the new program called ASEP. There is money set aside for Inuit and first nations for child care. We don't have any. We're on our own on that issue.

Métis, who have similar family structures to those of first nations, both having large young families, are denied child care supports, thus limiting our ability to meet the needs of these young families.

In both of these areas, provinces are not meeting our needs. Accordingly, we recommend that the federal government assume the role of supporting Métis governments in meeting the needs of Métis for child care in the area of early learning.

● (1535)

The Métis National Council has long acknowledged the importance of aboriginal labour force development programs that are respectful of Métis Nation governance structures. We are proud of our successes and recently sought an independent review of our results and the economic impacts of the work we are doing.

We are tabling here the Centre for the Study of Living Standards report, which I believe has not yet been given. I encourage you to take this study and read it. I know it's quite lengthy, but to grasp just a segment of that report...it showcases one small investment that I'll use as an example—and I'm speaking a little out of context here because I'm finishing off.

If the Métis were to actually attain the 2001 education level of non-aboriginal Canadians today, by 2026 we'd be contributing $81.5 billion into the economy—if we were just to put that segment of investment into our kids, put them into school, and get them into post-secondary education. It would average about a $3 billion rise in tax revenue, in fact a $7.5 billion rise in GDP, if that were to happen; and by 2026, it would mean an $81 billion rise in GDP in this country.

So I hope this study will enlighten you on some of the benefiting factors that would take place if the government would actually take a Métis-specific strategy and begin to invest in our needs.

I also want to table with you *Métis Works*—and I brought everybody a copy. It's one of our publications from the AHRDA program that we deliver for Canada. You'll note in the document when you read it—you can skim through it—the varying fields of people we train and jobs we create for them, whether it's in the police force, or heavy equipment and construction, or even the legal profession. The people we've invested in and the success we've had in attaining full-time jobs and maintaining those full-time jobs is quite profound in the sense of the moneys it's actually contributing back into Canada.

You'll also note our investments, when you read this document. We ourselves have started to invest through this program, in partnership with the universities, particularly in Manitoba, as an example. Through this program, as I echoed earlier, if we meet all our targets and interventions, the surplus dollars can be invested in post-secondary. We started that investment eight years ago in Manitoba. Today we have $9 million in endowment funds. The university has matched me dollar for dollar for every dollar I raise. We have now given $1.5 million back to our children who are going to university. So just a small intervention such as that, a little investment like that, has truly made a remarkable change. That's only $9 million. If it could be really well planned and well thought out, imagine what the true benefits would be.

I'll end with that. I know my ten minutes are up.

I usually like to speak off the cuff. I hate reading speeches. But I'm more than willing to answer any questions and try to give you the best snapshot I can of our situation as Métis people in Canada.

● (1540)

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Chartrand. We appreciate you reading your report and also the remarks that you have just made.

We will have the first round of questions. The seven minutes will include the question and the answer.

We'll start with Madam Minna.

Hon. Maria Minna (Beaches—East York, Lib.): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Welcome, and thank you for coming. We really appreciate this. We've been working on this report for some time and we want to make sure we get it right.

I want to touch on a few things with you. Could you fill me in a little bit on the situation with respect to women in the Métis community: women's income level and access to services, which is directly affected by some of the things you've already mentioned, such as child care, and so on, their impact on women's economic security?

Mr. David Chartrand: That's a very broad question. I'll reflect first and look at our government, the Métis government. In fact, most of the people who are employed there are women. Actually, a lot of them are in management and are directors. But if you look at the status of the community, you'll find that in Métis communities, women actually face a very challenging hill; they have to go over and above their male counterparts. In our culture the women are always the dominant force in the family, especially when it comes to children. You'll find in Métis communities that there are no programs set aside. There are no aboriginal head start programs; we don't have those in our communities. If somebody is fortunate enough to get a day care, again, it will not be located in our rural communities; we don't have them. They will have to travel great distances to drop off their children or find babysitting within their own families, and at the same time try to get an education or a job.

So the challenge women face is...I would say it's a major hindrance, in the sense of them catching up to the issue we find in this country. How do we balance the state of women versus men in this country? What I do know for a fact is that when we tried at the Métis National Council to raise the profile of Métis women, to include their views and their points, and to bring issues of this nature to the fore, we were disallowed funding.

We have our Métis Women's Secretariat, which is within our Métis Nation government structure, but Canada will not fund it. This is a standing position of the previous government and of this government. They will not fund it unless it incorporates itself and becomes a creature in itself—not to work with our governments, not to be with us, not to sit at the table to make change in the very fabric of what affects them; they have to be separate and completely apart from us. From our governance structure in the Métis government, it doesn't make sense. Even the women don't agree with it. For some reason, the government continues to push this issue, and Métis women today do not have either a seat at the constitutional table when we have discussions or a seat in the sense of the aboriginal leadership in this country.

We are still pressing that issue very strongly, but again, it's a good example to showcase that Métis women are falling further behind because there's a lack of support for them.

● (1545)

Hon. Maria Minna: I appreciate that, because I have some understanding, from having met with rural women in Canada... I have also met with some other aboriginal organizations. I was up in Iqaluit and met with women up there. I've been mainly trying to talk to women in different situations in the country, and I know that women tend to be much more isolated and poverty affects them a great deal more. When you deal with things like child care, as you said, the assumption is that if you're in rural Canada you don't need child care, because the kids have a lot of places to run, but of course you know that's not true—

Mr. David Chartrand: Yes.

Hon. Maria Minna: Many of them work part time, and many of them need training and education.

So access to services for women in rural areas...child care is one, but education and skills training are also a problem in terms of accessing government services.

Mr. David Chartrand: Definitely, because there is a lack of the supports they need, and that's what you'll find.

I say this openly and candidly in this room. Over half of the board in my government is women, so I can guarantee that women's issues are always at the forefront of our discussions. But what impresses me, as the president—we have over 800 employees, because we do child welfare and so forth in our province. It's amazing the strength they have, because they pick up their kids at day care, they go home, they cook, they clean, and then they come back to work again.

I'm a momma's boy first, and maybe that's why I see that concept. But clearly, from our standpoint, I think there's such a massive shortfall in the eyes of government, and in the eyes of our own governments, too. We need to put in more of a structured environment to create those opportunities for them. But the challenge you face is...for example, as I said, the Métis Women's Secretariat in our national movement is not allowed to get funding unless they go out on their own. Where that comes from does not make sense to me.

Hon. Maria Minna: Mr. Chartrand, thank you. I guess my time is up. I'm not sure.

The Chair: You have two minutes.

Hon. Maria Minna: Thank you.

I appreciate that, because it's obviously an area that I have some interest in.

I want to go back a little bit to some of the things you've said. You talked about education, skills training, and what that would do to us and to the Métis young people today if they were all to be educated and had access to education. And I agree with you, it is a waste for us not to educate our young people.

Can you tell me a little bit about housing, to what extent housing is a major issue in your communities—

Mr. David Chartrand: Well, the easiest way—

Hon. Maria Minna: I'm talking about affordable and accessible quality housing. If there is a lack of housing, to what extent does it affect the issue of health and other situations?

Mr. David Chartrand: There is a big housing crisis in Métis communities. We haven't had a house built in our communities for probably 12 or 15 years. The province is now embarking upon social housing, and we'll see where that takes us. There is clearly a shortfall. There's overcrowding, and it has a direct impact on families and what the women can do in their own households.

Housing is a growing factor, and it includes a health factor. Over the last four years we've done Métis-specific research, because Canada and the province do not have statistics on Métis people. You have it for first nations, but you don't have it for Métis.

The statistics show us that the Métis have surpassed most Canadians on chronic illnesses. We have now surpassed first nations on chronic illnesses, due to the lack of health programs. We have no health programs in our communities.

People might not believe what I'm saying here, but I encourage people to come to see our communities. Because of this jurisdictional limbo, nobody provides programs in our communities. We're on our own. We have to travel great distances even for health care. Sometimes we have to travel 100 miles just to see a doctor. We also have to pay for it ourselves. As you can see from the statistics I gave you regarding income levels, it's very difficult. Some people avoid seeing a doctor when they should see one. But they can't afford it. So there is a health crisis in our communities today.

On housing, I'm envisioning that in our province of Manitoba, for example, there might be some small fortune coming under the new housing the premier has announced. But we still have a long way to go.

● (1550)

The Chair: Thank you.

Monsieur Lessard, s'il vous plaît.

[*Translation*]

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

First, I would like to welcome our guests and tell them that their testimony is critical for our study on poverty. Likewise, when we conducted our study on employability, we had the occasion to hear presentations on conditions of access and job retention and to discover to what extent Aboriginal and Metis communities were sometimes prejudiced compared to non-Aboriginal people.

This day is all the more important because I should wish you a happy anniversary. In fact, this is the 50th anniversary of voting rights for First Nations. In a democratic society, I believe that this is very significant.

To get straight to the heart of what I want to say, in the beginning of 2009, in the context of the Economic Action Plan, you submitted to the Canadian government your own stimulus plan for the Metis nation. From what I can see in this project, and primarily from what you said earlier—if there are noteworthy distinctions to be made, I would like to be made aware of them—, it is important for us to know how your project was received by the Canadian government.

[*English*]

Mr. David Chartrand: What project are you referring to?

[*Translation*]

Mr. Yves Lessard: It is the economic action plan for the Metis nation that you have submitted to the Canadian government I believe in 2009.

[*English*]

Mr. David Chartrand: I'll start off with the last question with regard to the stimulus. In Canada we signed a protocol with Minister Strahl to advance a new partnership with the Métis people. One of the segments in the protocol was to include the Métis as part of this stimulus plan.

We were invited...in fact our national leader attended a meeting with the Prime Minister. We were encouraged to put together plans, which we did. I think we've got some comprehensive and well thought out strategies, which would make some significant change to our situation. We're hearing there's potential for some of them moving ahead.

One of them is called a syndicated loan fund. We just met with Strahl to try to emphasize and enhance that very quickly. The syndicated loan fund will partner with our capital corporations. We have three in western Canada. It would enhance the three capital corporations to be able to help small and medium-sized business give loans of up to $1 million.

It's a proven fact that the capital corporations we manage are very successful. We showcase quite a substantial number of loans and we've been able to sustain ourselves. The funding is provided through Aboriginal Business Canada. We then manage the affairs through... There's no funding beyond that. We fund ourselves by earning interest from our initial contribution.

The stimulus loan fund—we're hoping the syndicated one—will be the first one to come down. We haven't had any success beyond that at this point. We're hoping we can get some of these to grab traction. So with regard to that, this seems to be the most promising one at this point.

● (1555)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Yves Lessard: To what extent would this fund have an impact on the reduction of poverty? What elements of this measure would influence the level of poverty?

[*English*]

Mr. David Chartrand: If you look at the Métis community—and I'll give you an example of the economic incentives that occur in our community as indicators of jobs—our traditional economy is one of the pivotal creators of jobs. I'm talking about forestry, commercial fishing, tourism, trapping—pivotal traditional economies. They were the backbone of our communities. Most of those are now factored out. They've either been pushed out by bigger companies coming in from the United States and taking over the forestry—for example, in Manitoba—or the commercial fishery is being overrun by fresh water corporations. It's suffocating the industry. As these economies fall, we're seeing the communities falling apart.

I'll use my community of Duck Bay as the easiest example. We had a promising community, a booming community. We used to have five stores in our little community; today we have zero. We still have a population of 800 in that little community, but the entire economy is crumbling. You're seeing the 70% of people employed revert to 70% on welfare. No factory is coming tomorrow to replace this lack of traditional economies as they fade away.

Either we think outside the box and create new opportunities or we have to lift all these people from their rural areas and put them into urban centres to try to find jobs, because there are no other jobs coming tomorrow to replace the traditional economies that are crumbling.

It's a scary thing. It worries us a lot as leaders. Our Métis people have always been entrepreneurial and hard working. We pay hundreds of millions in taxes. At the end of the day, we're going to become a social problem if something is not done to change it quickly.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Yves Lessard: Am I to understand that your stimulus plan could provide us with a roadmap, for instance, to create instruments in the fight against poverty?

[*English*]

Mr. David Chartrand: Yes, guaranteed. If you take the time to reflect on some of the independent studies, they'll show what the spinoff will be if you invest in this or that field, not only for the Métis but for all Canadians. I think it's imperative to look outside of what...

If I can impress on this committee, I would encourage you not to get caught up on the word "aboriginal". That is just a definition of treaty peoples in this country. We use the word "aboriginal"... For example, there's an article in the paper—aboriginal people's education and university funds are being frozen at $300-million-and-something. My people are asking me where that money is. I'm telling them it's not for us; it's only for first nations. We get zero from that fund. But when government uses the word "aboriginal", Canadians think I'm getting all this money and my people are getting this money. We're getting nothing. So it's important that committees like this use this thinking as a base: either you're first nations, Métis, or Inuit. Then at least you'll know the money being spent is being spent in the right place and you can target and measure it and at the same time challenge, if investing that kind of money is not producing results.

The Chair: I'm sorry, your time...

[*Translation*]

Mr. Yves Lessard: For our own purposes, could the Committee obtain a copy of this plan that was submitted to the Minister? This report is dated from the beginning of last year.

[*English*]

The Chair: We can see if we can get that and we'll let you know. We'll find out.

● (1600)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Yves Lessard: [*The editor: technical difficulties*] …it is entirely possible since it is referenced in the Library notes. I suppose that it is possible.

An Hon. Member: We don't know if it is in French.

Mr. Yves Lessard: We could have it translated.

[*English*]

The Chair: We'll find out if we can get it in both official languages. We'll report back to you.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Yves Lessard: We could have it translated at that time.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Yves Lessard: Thank you.

[*English*]

The Chair: Mr. Martin.

Mr. Tony Martin (Sault Ste. Marie, NDP): Thank you for coming today and helping us with this work we're doing, which is to try to determine what will be the most appropriate intervention by the federal government in trying to relieve poverty in the country.

We know that many provinces have launched their own strategies, and you've mentioned today that in some instances provincial housing money has been promised. Now, you indicated that it hasn't really shown up on the street yet, but it's been promised.

I looked at a report from the Conference Board of Canada yesterday that indicated that 20% of the Canadian population cannot afford appropriate housing. They're either subsidized or they're in inappropriate housing for the size of the family, or whatever. And you have indicated to us today some of the challenges that face the Métis people.

What we're looking for are some thoughts and ideas on what it is you think, given our mandate and jurisdictional responsibility, we could do that would be most helpful. Maybe you could prioritize that for the Métis people. You mentioned education for your children. You mentioned housing. So what would be the most important?

Are there any examples you can point to out there in the Métis community across Canada where you're having success and perhaps where the different levels of government are participating?

Mr. David Chartrand: Thank you.

If there were any recommendation I'd suggest that would result in significant change, clearly it would be investing in Métis-specific child care. That would be the first and fundamental one, to strengthen the family. It has to be Métis. I used the words “Métis-specific”. Don't use the word “aboriginal”, because then we'll probably never get it, but if you use the words “Métis-specific child care” as a direct focus, I think you will see a major change. It will help the situation as it pertains to Métis women in this country, but also give some stability to the family household.

The second recommendation I'd make, clearly, is creating an education fund. I gave the example of the endowment fund that we have been able to create by dollar-for-dollar matching with universities. We have returned $1.5 million in revenue back to our kids in post-secondary education.

We know that Statistics Canada shows that the Métis are the fastest growing aboriginal population in western Canada. The Métis are growing by leaps and bounds, based on everybody self-declaring who they are. More importantly, if Canada were to take, for example, $300 million and put it into an endowment fund, then our Métis students could tap into that through our governments. That would be a one-time contribution the government could make. It would always be something that Métis children and their families would know was resting in place, so they can pursue an education.

What we are finding, for example, is that our children are going to school and more of them are graduating from grade 12 than before, but they are stopping there. That is not what this country needs. What is triggering this and what I think we have been able to capture —though statistically we can't show this—from discussions with our communities and families is that our children are not going past the second phase because our traditional economies have fallen. With that, the parents have no money to help their kids go to university. That is another indicator that it's causing great harm.

So educational investment would be a major change to help us, because we can compete with anybody equally. Apples to apples, we'll compete with anybody; give us a chance. We just don't have the tools for our kids to finish off their education.

Other examples of things that we're doing in Manitoba, and where change can happen, are in the area of procurement. You have a procurement strategy in this country, but you're not really utilizing it to its full extent, for the economic engines to actually take heed of it and develop. In Manitoba we're pushing hard for set-asides, not procurement, which should be automatic, but set-asides, which are a different segment of procurement. I say this because if there were an aboriginal set-aside for first nations and Métis and Inuit to compete against each other...whether in the construction industry or anything else, we are doing extremely well at it. The challenge we face is that not all governments want to go down that path, yet it is such a great success.

So I would encourage you to push this type of innovative way of thinking, whereby governments create opportunities by developing set-asides.

We have our own procurement strategy—

● (1605)

The Chair: Can you explain what set-asides are?

Mr. David Chartrand: Set-asides, Madam Chair, are this. In Manitoba, the Premier, for example, had a procurement strategy for the Red River diversion, saying that so many aboriginal people had to be hired for that. However, what he also did was to take $50 million and put it into a separate fund where only aboriginal construction contractors could compete inside that industry.

In fact, he praised it before the Prime Minister at the first ministers meeting. It was very successful. In fact, it came under budget and was definitely on time.

The Chair: I see. Thank you.

Mr. David Chartrand: Those types of initiatives are great, but they are few and far between.

What we are finding now is that some of our companies that are starting to formulate themselves to become successful are being swallowed up by bigger companies. That's why they'll become the dinosaurs of the past, if there are no set-asides.

For example, a small Métis company in Manitoba started off with a truck, but the company owner can now bond up to $30 million or $35 million on hydro or construction projects. He's being swallowed up by big companies like Valard, which are undercutting him by $5 million to $7 million, and they are clearly doing it with the premise of getting rid of him. He basically came to plead with us on hydro that if it happened to him on one or two more hits, he would be finished. What is going to happen is that those little companies are all going to die out, and then Valard is going to be the only player in town, so those prices will go back up. It's like the loss leader in business.

We feel that the set-asides are protecting that, and we're pushing hydro and other institutions like them to start thinking that way.

In Manitoba we started our own procurement strategy in my own government. I pushed for it three years ago. Under it, 70% of all of my buying power has to go to Métis businesses or first nations businesses. I planted the seed. Now I can see the seeds sprouting out of the grass everywhere.

We spend millions on supplies, and yet we were going to Grand & Toy or Staples, even though they are not bringing anything back to my community. So now we have this procurement strategy in our Métis government. We are starting our own stationary company, our Métis "Staples", if you want to call it that, and we are starting our own companies, which are starting to grow. We are pushing these types of strategic moves in our own economic engines, which although we have little of, we're seeing a dramatic turn of events taking place.

The Chair: Sorry, your time is up.

I have a quick question for you before we go to Mr. Komarnicki. Do you find as well in the rural communities—because we see this with the aboriginal and non-aboriginal, Métis and all populations—that a lot of kids aren't leaving to go to university or to trade schools because of the whole issue of leaving the rural area? It's not just leaving home, but the expense. Do you think there is value in developing more community colleges in our rural areas so there will be more uptake with all of our kids? I'm thinking specifically of trades.

Mr. David Chartrand: Thank you for the question, Madam Chair.

It reflects on my meetings I just concluded with university presidents. In Brandon, for example—let's talk about our province—there's a 0.5% vacancy rate. What they're finding is that there are also many... It goes back to an earlier question by—I forget her name, and I apologize. But we're finding that more single mothers aren't able to go because they have children. At 0.5%, they can't stay in the dorms.

So what we're finding is there's no place for these people to stay in rural versus the urban centres. Clearly finding innovative ways to bring the education to them would make a significant change. But a lot of universities can't afford to make that change right now with the tuition fight that's taking place. Clearly that would be one of the answers, because they don't have a place to go right now. There's a serious concern by most presidents right now in western Canada.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Mr. Komarnicki, please.

Mr. Ed Komarnicki (Souris—Moose Mountain, CPC): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you for your presentation.

I heard you mention things like housing, and of course education is another big issue, as well as employment. Certainly you've used the words that the programs that are put forward should be Métis-specific in nature and specific types of action. I appreciate that when we talk about aboriginal programs it may include first nations, Inuit, and Métis, but it may not always work for the Métis.

Do I understand that you would like to see programs that take your specific needs and barriers that are unique to yourself into account in the design of the program? Or are you saying that there should be new programs? What do you see as some of the barriers and differences between the Canadian population, the first nations population, and yours that would require that specificity in the programs or the actions taken?

● (1610)

Mr. David Chartrand: I've been involved in politics for a long time. Sometimes there could be enough money as it now sits to actually make a big difference. The challenge we face is that it's not steered in the right direction. It got lost in a maze of end results where we don't know what the success was.

For example look at the Métis-specific reference I make, the AHRDA program. It's one of the best programs that ever came out of this country for the Métis people. That's all it is, giving us the resources to help fund and decide what training we would institute, where, and how we'd embark upon ensuring that our students are focused in the right direction.

Out of that, for example, MMF has been the lead in the top tenders. There are 80 AHRDAs in Canada. The first nations, Inuit, and Métis have AHRDAs. The Métis have five AHRDAs in five provinces. Bands are structured completely different from us.

Overall, MMF, for example, has been in the top ten in the last 10 years. We're very proud of our success. We've also employed 35,000 Métis people in the last 10 years. It's quite a dramatic opportunity for us in the sense that we now have the tools to bring in the private sector to be a partner with us.

We find most of our success in the Métis homeland is with small and medium-sized sector businesses. Yes, we get opportunities with the large enterprises—whether it's Ledcor or big companies—but it's just a hiccup, I will call it. It's like our Canadian dollar, it goes up and down—this kind of concept. But we find that our success is really balanced on the choices we can make.

The AHRDA program that I will emphasize here is being renegotiated in a sense. It's called ASEP now. What concerns me the most right now with the bureaucracy is that they are trying to micromanage it. From my perspective, if the wheel is not broken and we're successful, why change it? We're pushing very, very hard to convince the minister—who we just had a good meeting with—to move ahead in this ongoing direction.

You can measure that Métis guidance. You can know that the Canadian tax dollars, including the Métis tax dollars, that we collect are actually benefiting not only the Métis but Canada as a whole, because there are targets and there are ways to measure that success.

Clearly that's the path, and we should use that model as the example. It would make such a significant difference in the way we do it. If we take all of the aboriginal funding that we have in this country and we start dividing it Métis-specific, first nations, and Inuit-specific, and then put targets and measures, I think you'll see a massive change. It might not even require an investment of new dollars.

Mr. Ed Komarnicki: So just making sure there are specific allocations with some accountability in terms of how it's managed and the effect it's having.

In my sense, it would take a certain measure of collaboration or partnership, perhaps, where you are part of the process, the design of the program and the monitoring of it, and then the follow-up on it. Is that what you're getting at in terms of what needs to happen?

Mr. David Chartrand: In my view, accountability is essential. It has to come. I've been elected four successful times. I have elections coming and I can anticipate being elected again for the fifth successful time. I always tell my people that my job as president is to manage their money. At the end of the day, I have to be accountable. I can tell you that we're definitely strongly accountable in the sense of our design. We continue to stress how we can be more effective in how we expend our resources. For example, our challenge is this. This committee wants to talk about poverty, about how you change the very essence of that process. It's by helping governments like the Métis government.

The more successful I get, the more government wants to cut me. I'm punished for being successful. That's wrong. Somebody should be praising us for being successful. It's scary. I have to hide my assets, because if you find out I have money, you want to take it from me. I'm not joking about that. I'll give you an example. We bought buildings, and these buildings are now profitable. The government came back to me and said they should own half of those profits. I asked, “Why should you? Because we rent from you? Well, you rent from other people and you don't go after the profits from the private sector. So why would you take half of mine?” But that was the mentality. We had to fight with them.

Somehow we have to think outside of the box and start actually enhancing the ability... As I said, I'm not coming to this table to ask for a bunch more money as a solution. That's not the solution. The solution is putting a plan of action where you can measure it, make it accountable, and target it at the same time. If we produce, don't punish us. Praise us and give us more.

● (1615)

Mr. Ed Komarnicki: Chair, I have a couple of points. I'm not sure what my time is like.

With respect to housing, for instance, we have a certain measure of funds allocated for seniors and those who are disabled. Then we have another chunk of billions of dollars of housing for the aboriginals in the north and so on. Are those programs not working for your community? How would you see their being designed differently so you could use them to maximum advantage just in that specific area of housing?

Mr. David Chartrand: There are two fronts on that. First, the houses that INAC builds are not for us, they are for first nations. We haven't had any houses built in the communities, as I said, for over a decade for sure.

We don't have any senior homes. We had a few built at one time, back in the late eighties or early nineties, but that was it. Overall, our seniors live together with their families and they're all piled up in the house.

The challenge that I think the federal government faces right now—and I say this openly—is that when you transfer funds under CST, for example, the Canadian social transfer process, you give it to the province, but you don't put any targets on it. You don't put any accountability on that province. You don't put any measurables on that province as to how it is spending the federal money that you gave to the province to make sure it's actually going to my people and serving my people. There is none. So where they take that money and use it in their provincial budget has a negative effect on our side.

One of the issues I've been pushing for is that if I'm going to be accountable, so should they. From my perspective, I think if the federal government wants to transfer money to the province for housing, it should make a clear distinction of some targets that it has to measure against the Métis people. Those are my tax dollars you are using, too.

So as I said, I'd love to see that kind of accountability take place on both sides. From our perspective, I think you'll see a major difference. Even with social housing, will they come into our communities with it? I hope they do. The premier says they are going to come to some of my communities, but I don't know how many of them will get lucky.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Chartrand.

We're going to try for a very quick second round of questions. We'll only have time for three minutes from each questioner.

We'll begin with Mr. Savage, please.

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

Thank you very much, Mr. Chartrand and Ms. Watteyne, for coming.

You mentioned some work you had done with CCL, the Canadian Council on Learning.

Mr. David Chartrand: Yes.

Mr. Michael Savage: I'm just going to read from the report that they've just released:

> Aboriginal people in Canada have long understood the role that learning plays in building healthy, thriving communities. Despite significant cultural and historical differences, Canada's First Nations, Inuit and Métis people share a vision of learning as a holistic, lifelong process.

It goes on to say:

> However, the effectiveness of these decisions still typically rely on conventional measurement approaches that offer a limited—and indeed incomplete—view of the state of Aboriginal learning in Canada.

CCL has come up with a measurement, which they call “The State of Aboriginal Learning in Canada: A Holistic Approach to Measuring Success”.

Are you familiar with that? Were you involved in that? Do you have any views on that?

Mr. David Chartrand: My office was involved, but at this point I would stray away from answering directly. I would have to reflect on the question a bit more and read the full context of what the recommendation means in its entirety.

Clearly, from our perspective, the holistic kind of concept is more than learning, getting an education; it's learning how to be proud of who we are and the culture of our people.

I think it's essential for anybody to have an education. My mom raised me to never forget where I come from. I think the pride of establishing that at a young age has a significant impact in the long run. You can have a master's degree in some field, but if you don't know much about who you're dealing with, then it has no significant impact.

Maybe the point they're trying to raise holistically would be... From our perspective, we always look at it in that family context. That's why we're so close-knit, as a nation.

● (1620)

Mr. Michael Savage: In this holistic measurement, they speak about, for example, sources and domains of knowledge, exposure to elders, time spent with elders, use of traditional skills, participation in cultural ceremonies. They've taken this and they've worked with your office, and other aboriginal organizations, to try to come up with a way of measuring.

This is a bit of a political issue that we don't need to get into now, but CCL is losing its funding. They were funded for five years. They were allowed to exist on fumes for a year, and now they're gone, except for some funding from outside of Canada. I think it's a shame. Obviously some of the work they've done has been very innovative in trying to identify how we close the gap on education attainment between Canada's aboriginal and non-aboriginal people.

It's not so much what happens in terms of graduating from university but how we assure they get that opportunity to get to university. I recognize that the Métis have not been part of the PSSSP and other things like that, which probably they should be.

Anyway, it seems to be a shame that we're going to lose the opportunity to evaluate innovative approaches to looking at aboriginal learning, which would eventually certainly have an impact on poverty.

Mr. David Chartrand: Oh, it definitely would.

Mr. Michael Savage: Thank you.

The Chair: Mr. Vellacott.

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

David, I want to ask some questions, but first I want to be sure that some of the programs I will list here include your people. I want to be sure that we have nothing falling between the cracks, that your people are not omitted from some of these.

The government has attempted to do some things for vulnerable Canadians to give a hand up and get them back into the economy. The working income tax benefit, to make work pay and help low-income Canadians over the welfare wall, helped some 900,000 people in the first year.

David, I take it your people can get the WITB, the working income tax benefit.

Mr. David Chartrand: I'm sure they will, yes.

Mr. Maurice Vellacott: Okay. In terms of seniors, there were tax cuts, and about one million low-income Canadians are not paying taxes at all any more. That included 85,000 seniors.

I think I'll answer that question for you. I assume, again, that Métis elders would be a part of that as well.

Mr. David Chartrand: Well, for specific questions like that, it would be no different from the questions that were posed to me here. I think it would be only fair for me to statistically capture the essence of what that benefit would be. I can say it would benefit some, of course, in some form or fashion, but I don't know how many. The true benefit factor would be something I'd have to reflect upon before answering.

Mr. Maurice Vellacott: Again, the Métis people are allowed into what's called the enhanced national child benefit and child tax benefit for low-income families. If you have low-income Métis families, you are a part of that as well. That's nothing that you're excluded from.

Mr. David Chartrand: Is that the $100 or—

Mr. Maurice Vellacott: No, I'm getting to that. That's called the UCCB. This is just—

Mr. David Chartrand: Oh, okay, all these acronyms are driving me crazy. But keep going.

Mr. Maurice Vellacott: The child benefit, the CCTB, is the one I'm talking about specifically here.

Mr. David Chartrand: And that's the one that gives additional dollars.

Mr. Maurice Vellacott: I'll go to that right away.

Wenda, do you have an answer to that? Métis people can get the child tax benefit, I assume.

Mr. David Chartrand: Explain the child tax benefit. Is that the one where if you have children...the allowance, as they used to call it?

Mr. Maurice Vellacott: Yes.

Mr. David Chartrand: In fact I think that's a great program.

Mr. Maurice Vellacott: Okay, good.

You had some comments about child care programs and so on, and I heard some of your remarks in respect of that. So my next question is in respect to the UCCB, the universal child care benefit—the $100 per month. That's lifted a lot of families—some 28,000 in total, about 56,000 people—out of low income. What are your people telling you with respect to that?

Mr. David Chartrand: On that particular one, given the fact that it's there to assist the family and help them to pay for their own child care, we can't say that... You have to be so careful; I don't want you to take my words out of context here. I think anything that gives to citizens and families is helpful. How you measure it is a secondary issue, and I think how we can transport that into a proper reflection... All Canadians are entitled to health care in this country, for example, but if you look at our Métis communities, we don't have health programs in our communities. We have to travel 100 miles, and if you base it on an income status, a lot of people...

In fact, I know of one person who just passed on because he didn't want to pay to go to see a doctor. He was a pensioner, and he died at a fishing lake, because he didn't want to buy his medicine. He was being cheap. I use that phrase because he was being very frugal with his money as a pensioner, and he didn't buy the medicine. He ended up dying.

So, yes, we're all entitled to health care in this country, but if we can't get to it, or its impact is not as beneficial, then I can't praise it in an open-ended way. But I do agree it helps.

● (1625)

The Chair: Mr. Vellacott, that's all the time you have.

Thank you, Mr. Chartrand.

Madam Faille.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Meili Faille (Vaudreuil-Soulanges, BQ): Congratulations, Madam Chair. You are the first chair to pronounce my name correctly. Thank you very much.

I would like to ask a question of the witnesses. I sit on the Public Accounts Committee. I don't know if you are aware of this, but the Auditor General was very critical in regards to the performance of Indian and Northern Affairs in chapter 4 of her May 2008 report. A number of the issues you presented here in this Committee were raised, including coordination between departments, the various ministerial perspectives, the timeframes for delivery of services, the absence of program availability in some communities—here, in specific reference to the violence reduction program which is only available in half of the communities—, Treasury Board regulations that are very restrictive and which complicate the coordination and the implementation of programs, as well as a funding formula based on socio-economic criteria which are now outdated. This report is quite recent and is dated 2008.

Moreover, the Auditor General noted that spending on government programs is increasing significantly, but that the department's budget is not adequate and is not following the increase in expenditures.

Are you aware of this report? What is the view of the Metis Nation regarding this situation?

[*English*]

Mr. David Chartrand: Again on that note, most of the remarks of the Auditor General are a reflection of the Department of Indian Affairs, which has little impact on us. Indian Affairs makes their position very clear: their responsibility is first nations and Inuit.

As I said, the Métis are still floundering. Where do we fit into society, and who do we actually work with? But there are segments now, where one of our small departments has been put under Indian Affairs. The challenge is that the policies and the design of services coming out of Indian Affairs are just being blanketed over our little... What we call the office of the federal interlocutor is being forced to follow those policies, which have a completely opposite view of everything, because we're not struck like first nations. Our governments are not the same—our entire method of operations is completely different—but we're being blanketed with a policy.

I do know we've raised issues with the Auditor General with regard to the Métis, and we're trying to push a study to be done on our financial affairs. As I said, we do not fear accountability. The issue at the end of the day is that we believe clearly there's a great missed opportunity in this country—that Métis are being left out.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Meili Faille: Thank you.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you, very much.

We want to thank you again for being here, for taking the time to give us your thoughts and your presentation, and answering some of our questions.

We will now hear from another group, the National Association of Friendship Centres. I'll ask them to take their place, and then we'll continue with their presentation.

Thank you both for being here.

Mr. David Chartrand: If I can say on behalf of the Métis people, I'm very pleased and honoured to be here and to have a chance to reflect on some of these questions. If there are any further questions, please get a hold of us and we'll respond.

Mr. Vellacott, if you want to write me a letter, I can clearly reflect back my positions on those. I'd be most appreciative...to answer as best I can.

Again, thank you, Madam Chair, for having us here. I hope what I've been able to share will shed some light on the very important job you have here.

I'll leave these here for you to pass around, please. Thank you very much.

The Chair: Great. We can all take a copy.

Thank you.

● _____ (Pause) _____

●

● (1630)

The Chair: Could I have everyone's attention, please, so we can begin the rest of our meeting?

We're very pleased to have the National Association of Friendship Centres with us today. We have Peter Dinsdale and Conrad Saulis with us. It's good to have you here.

You'll have an opportunity to give us a 10-minute presentation, and then, as we did with the previous presenters, we'll ask you some questions.

Who will be presenting? Mr. Dinsdale, you will?

If you could go ahead, you have 10 minutes, please.

Mr. Peter Dinsdale (Executive Director, National Association of Friendship Centres): Thank you very much.

I'd like to thank the committee for the invitation to come and speak on this very important issue of poverty in Canada and what the federal response can and maybe should be. It's part of the work that we do every day, so it's a great honour to come and share some of those perspectives that we may have on it.

I'd like to begin by acknowledging that we meet here today on the Algonquin territories, and I thank them for allowing us to gather on their territories. I'm an Ojibway from Curve Lake First Nation in central Ontario, but in my day job I'm the executive director of the National Association of Friendship Centres. I'm joined by our policy director, Conrad Saulis, who will help me answer all your difficult questions when they arise.

The National Association of Friendship Centres is the national organization representing the concerns and interests of 120 local friendship centres across the country. We're the national office, and we deliver programs to those local centres through our office, and in addition, we support the work they do on the ground.

I think I said today that there are 120 friendship centres across Canada from coast to coast to coast, and last year they provided over $114 million in programs and services directly on the ground to urban aboriginal people. Friendship centres have long been engaged in the issue of poverty reduction, and in fact some may argue that our original purpose was around poverty reduction.

Our provincial office in Ontario in the year 2000 actually conducted a study on urban aboriginal child poverty in Ontario, and I think they found things that would not be surprising to this committee; for instance, child and family poverty in Canada is rooted in cultural fragmentation and the multi-generational effects of things such as residential schools, wardship to the child welfare system, and broader socio-economic marginalization. Recent studies have indicated that aboriginal people are four times more likely to report experiencing hunger than any other group in Canada.

If there is one thing to take away from my presentation today, I hope it is this, that Canada's aboriginal population is urban.

In the 2006 census, 54% of all aboriginal peoples lived in cities and towns across Canada. That offers an incredible policy challenge, and when we're asking what should the federal government's response be to poverty—in this instance, aboriginal poverty—I think we need to look in the cities and towns where these people are living.

This is a growth from 1996, when 47% lived in urban areas, all the way to 54% ten years later in 2006. The other important issue is that half of our population is under the age of 25. If you think about it, we're a very young and urban population struggling to cope in cities all across this country.

There are a number of tremendous challenges. Our people are not graduating high school at the same rates as the rest of Canadian society. I often wonder if half of the students in Rosedale in Toronto, or in the Glebe here in Ottawa, or Westmount in Montreal weren't graduating from high school, what would be the outcry? What would be the study that's happening here today? Where are the royal commissions that would be championing...? Which provinces would be clamouring at the doors? Which political parties would be championing these issues?

It's the exact same issue that exists in the aboriginal community, with half of our kids not graduating from high school, and frankly, it's a national disgrace. There's a bit of irony, though. Despite the fact that our people are not graduating high school, our people are participating in labour market activities at a higher rate than general Canadian society. In urban communities across Canada, 68% of aboriginal people participate in the labour force. The non-aboriginal rate is 67%. Despite the barriers in education and cultural reintegration in societies, our people are trying to be engaged in the economy; they're trying to work. They are becoming more and more disenfranchised, however, because they're not finding success.

We have twice the unemployment rate as our brothers and sisters in the exact same neighbourhoods who aren't aboriginal. Our incomes are way lower. In fact, 29% of aboriginal families in cities and towns across this country live in poverty, as articulated by the low-income cut-off, versus 13% of their neighbours. It's a tremendous disparity that exists. Of single people, 53% of aboriginal people who are single in cities and towns across this country live in poverty, below the low-income cut-off, versus 38% for the non-aboriginal population. When we look to more marginalized groups, we're seeing the greater kind of stratification occur in areas of poverty.

The National Council on Welfare reported in 2007 that there were 637,000 children under the age of 18 living in poverty in Canada, and at that time it was an all-time low. When we cut into the data, 28% of aboriginal children living in urban areas grow up in poverty versus 13% in mainstream society.

● (1635)

A lot of times, people will say there are no opportunities in first nations communities, or, as you heard from our previous speaker, in Métis hamlets, so come to the cities and you'll have a better quality of life and better chances. In fact, urban aboriginal residents are not finding that. They're finding the same barriers and the same challenges, while they are surrounded by prosperity.

In part, frustrated by the lack of information and the lack of real data on urban aboriginal people, we commissioned our own research on the 2006 and 2001 census surveys. We looked at every community across Canada that had more than 400 aboriginal people and was not a reserve. We wanted to run a host of socio-demographic statistics to find out what was happening in cities and towns across Canada. If you ask Statistics Canada for the latest reports on aboriginal people, you're going to get 13 CMAs at best, if you're lucky. You'll probably get six. You won't get what's happening up north. You won't get what's happening in the rural hinterlands. We wanted to find out what was happening all across Canada.

In fact, if you're curious, there are 304 communities across Canada that have more than 400 aboriginal people and are not reserves.

We have a whole host of data. One of the really interesting things we did was to utilize the community well-being index, which was generated by Indian and Northern Affairs to understand what was happening on reserves and what their development was like. It's a proxy for the human development index. The problem in Canada is that we don't capture life expectancy for aboriginal people, so we can't actually apply the HDI measure, which is used internationally, to aboriginal people in Canada.

Statistics Canada applied this new measure, called the community well-being Index, and we applied it to cities and towns across Canada. Over half of all the aboriginal people in these cities and towns lived at what's called very low or low levels of community well-being. Their total combination of housing, education, labour force, and income resulted in their having either low or very low levels of community well-being. No non-aboriginal communities—zero—had low or very low levels of community well-being. And there were no aboriginal communities in cities and towns across this country that had very high levels of community well-being.

The vast majority of non-aboriginal communities—82.2%—were in the high category, meaning they had very high levels of community well-being. You can think of Toronto and Sault Ste. Marie and other areas that have wonderful development. Aboriginal people living in the exact same communities beside all that prosperity have low levels of community well-being.

It's a real challenge we have, and it's something that, as a service provider to aboriginal people in this country, we're challenged with. How do we provide services to these people, and frankly, how do we deal with poverty reduction strategies day to day?

The National Council of Welfare, in its recent pre-budget submission, was very clear as to what needs to be done to have poverty reduction in this country. They said there are five areas we need to focus on: child care, affordable housing, education, health care, and employment. Maybe we'll get into some of these interventions as there is the opportunity to talk.

Across the board, aboriginal access to these programs and services is diminished. Child care is a great example. We have some programs across the country. But there is very little happening in a systemic way that is going to help a single aboriginal woman in downtown Winnipeg put her kid in child care—safe, effective, affordable child care—so that she can finish school, go to work, and have a higher quality of life. It doesn't exist today, and it's a challenge we have day to day.

With respect to affordable housing programs, there was $300 illion in off-reserve housing programs not too long ago. It went to the provinces. That rollout has stalled dramatically and is not having an impact in the communities where it needs to.

Education, I submit, is clearly a provincial responsibility, but the federal government can lead. It can lead in post-secondary institutions or it can lead by piloting exciting initiatives to help aboriginal people finish high school, which is the single greatest thing we can do to alleviate poverty among people living in these communities.

Health care interventions in areas like diabetes, HIV/AIDS, and alcohol-related birth defects and related syndromes are critical to having urban-specific interventions for aboriginal people that will have a long-term impact.

Finally, employment. The federal government's flagship aboriginal employment program, the aboriginal human resources development strategy, has only a toehold in urban areas. The policy focus is on and the vast majority of the agreement holders have a first nation or Métis or Inuit perspective, as opposed to serving people where they live in cities and towns across the country.

I know I'm running out of time.

● (1640)

The Chair: You have 30 seconds.

Mr. Peter Dinsdale: We have done research ourselves this year on what's happening across Canada on poverty through our friendship centres. One hundred percent of the centres reported to us that the federal, provincial, and municipal governments have not properly addressed poverty for aboriginal people in cities and towns.

It requires many of the interventions we discussed today. But I think we need to work together.

I'm going to leave you with this quote from Jim Silver, from a book called *Solutions That Work: Fighting Poverty in Winnipeg*. He wrote:

> While it is true that poverty is a complex and multi-faceted phenomenon for which there is no single solution, it is nevertheless the case that community-based initiatives are a necessary feature of any real and lasting attempt to eradicate poverty in Canada.

The friendship centres across Canada are ready to be a partner in that process.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Dinsdale. You were right on time. Thank you for that.

We're going to begin our first round. I think, committee members, we'll do a five-minute round and then a three-minute round, and hopefully we'll give everyone a chance to ask questions. The first round will be five minutes.

Madame Folco.

Ms. Raymonde Folco (Laval—Les Îles, Lib.): Thank you, Chair.

Mr. Dinsdale, it's a mouthful, everything you've described in terms of statistics and in terms of the very tragic conditions of, generally, first nations, Inuit, and Métis people throughout Canada.

I'm going to ask a question on women's health. That's not because the others—housing, education, and so on—aren't important, but I'm very involved right now in women's health, particularly touching on first nations, Métis, and Inuit in Canada. My question is in terms of nutrition for pregnant women, in terms of while they're pregnant, deliveries, when the baby is born, and nutrition for the young baby. Can you describe (a) what the conditions are, generally speaking; and (b) what has been done or what the federal government could do? Keep in mind, of course, that there is some provincial jurisdiction in all this. I think it's really important.

Mr. Peter Dinsdale: Thank you for the question. It's critical.

One of my first jobs out of university was working at a drop-in centre in downtown Toronto called Native Child and Family Services. We would often see young street women or young mothers coming in who were pregnant. We would help them with parenting programs, bring them through their pregnancy until the child was born, and make sure they had proper nutrition. And as those children grew, we would make sure the mother and the child had access to programs, which in part probably seeded some of my passion, which you heard with respect to the single aboriginal woman in downtown Winnipeg.

The federal government is leading in three important ways right now. I think they're successful interventions, and I think they need to be grown. The first is a community action plan for children. It's been very successful in communities all across the country in providing services. I believe it's up for renewal, if it hasn't been renewed already. And it's one of those projects that really impacts people where they live and assures that there's access to programs. The related one is the Canada prenatal nutrition program, which clearly speaks specifically to what you're speaking about. And I think there's a mixed bag of other interventions across the country, which may be municipally funded, may have their own source of revenue, or may be provincially funded as well, that groups have been engaged in.

The other really important project is the aboriginal head start program, for ensuring that when these families who are disenfranchised have an opportunity to actually move forward, they have successfully integrated programs in place.

Maybe I'll give my colleague Conrad Saulis an opportunity to talk about the importance of that particular program and what can or should be done.

● (1645)

Mr. Conrad Saulis (Policy Director, National Association of Friendship Centres): Thank you, Peter.

The head start program provides opportunities for children zero to six years of age to be able to start off on their lifelong learning at very formative ages. The people, who are predominantly aboriginal women, working in these head start programs provide culturally based and oriented education to young children.

It's remarkable to visit head start programs. The aboriginal women who are there are full of life, full of happiness, because this is what they've been wanting to do for a long time. They've been wanting to teach the children their culture, their language, and have the pride and self-esteem reborn in these children to give them that really strong footing so that they can be successful in school. The numbers Peter mentioned a while ago, in terms of the number of dropouts, our children not completing high school, can be reversed and undone. It's going to take a few generations, but I think the head start program is definitely one of those key programs.

There's also another early childhood program, which doesn't necessarily get—

Ms. Raymonde Folco: I have to interrupt you, Mr. Saulis. Excuse me for not being very polite.

Mr. Conrad Saulis: No, that's fine.

Ms. Raymonde Folco: I want to ask a specific question. I have an idea in the back of my mind.

What about the distance between where people live? A lot of aboriginals, generally speaking, except for those who live in urban centres, live quite far away from centres such as clinics, hospitals, and so on, and I just wondered about the conditions in which women give birth. Can you speak to that?

I want to move away from education just for the time being. That's why I interrupted you.

The Chair: Very quickly, if you could, Mr. Dinsdale.

Mr. Peter Dinsdale: I think again it's important to emphasize that, yes, it's true, of course, in rural and remote communities that there absolutely are access issues. I think it's hard for a middle class Indian like me to get a family doctor here. It's much harder when you're street-involved to get a family doctor or to have the proper pediatrician afterwards or the proper follow-up care. So the challenges are terrific. Again, it's access to health care, as the previous witness talked about. It's not merely to say it's there; it's actually having it accessible to people in communities where they go. It absolutely remains a challenge.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Lessard, please.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Yves Lessard: Thank you, Madam Chair.

I also thank our guests for coming here today to speak on behalf of the National Association of Friendship Centres.

In the context of these studies on poverty, we note that a number of factors impact importantly on the conditions which underlie poverty. Among these factors, there is of course employment—you have raised the issue of access to employment and job retention—and affordable housing.

In 2007, a special rapporteur of the United Nations came to Canada to study the issue of affordable housing among Aboriginal peoples. In addition to other observations, he noted overcrowding and the lack of housing and raised the issue of water and sanitation services. He recommended to the government that it: “Intensify measures to close the human development indicator gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Canadians.”

In regards to housing, he added this: “That adequate housing in a large number of Aboriginal communities be declared a priority objective Make adequate housing a priority in many Aboriginal communities and that adequate credits, investment and other resources be appropriated to solve this urgent problem within the shortest possible time frame.”

Since these recommendations were made, have you noticed any changes? If so, which ones?

At this time, are there significant projects that are likely to improve the housing situation?

● (1650)

[*English*]

Mr. Peter Dinsdale: The quick answer is no. We haven't noticed an improvement certainly since 2007. I think there has been $300 million in off-reserve housing, which has gone to the provinces. We think the delivery really has handcuffed a lot of folks in terms of having results on the ground at the end of the day.

I think part of the challenge we have in Canada with respect to social housing has been the success of the homeless programs. We've lost our focus from market-based rents or social housing or to owning your own home to focusing on shelters, whether it's initial or second-stage shelters. So I certainly have not seen an improvement in housing in the short term.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Yves Lessard: For us who have to submit recommendations to the government, are there any enabling projects underway. I mean projects that would inspire ideas for the development of affordable housing or do we have to start from scratch? If so, where do we begin?

[*English*]

Mr. Peter Dinsdale: I think you have a very successful base to build upon out there. There are a lot of native housing providers that have existing stock that can be grown. As an administrator I've always been frustrated by the inability of these mortgagors who are stuck in 35-year CMHC mortgages to leverage their existing housing stock to build more houses, to stay within the CMHC housing stock. If you have all this capital and equity, I'm not sure why you can't draw down upon that to build more units.

Secondly, I think we also need to focus more intensely on aboriginal people owning their own homes, building their own equity and buying their own homes, and having programs in place, like loan forgiveness programs or the CMHC-backed loans or other measures, which are going to help people own their homes sooner.

I think we've had a lot of focus again on emergency sheltering and stage two sheltering kinds of focuses. I think we need to take a longer-term view on moving from social housing concepts to people owning their own homes. I think there's a definite role the federal government can play there.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Yves Lessard: Why is it that some communities find themselves without any sanitation infrastructure not unlike the situation in 1990? Why is it that several Aboriginal communities, living for the most part in the wild, still have a major problem with water quality?

[*English*]

Mr. Peter Dinsdale: I think most of the housing issues that were referred to, of course, are around first nations, and I think it is an embarrassment that we have that kind of infrastructure. But those challenges exist in urban areas as well, and do you know what? It's a market-based approach to poverty. What happens is, if you simply cannot afford to live anywhere else, you go to where you can live. Your cousins come into town and they come in with you. It breaks down your infrastructure and your home. If you've had the opportunity to be in the Moccasin Flats in Regina, or of course the downtown east side, or parts of Winnipeg or even Saskatoon, it's incredible the decrepit conditions of the houses that exist.

I think slumlords have a role to play in the enforcement of existing housing standards. I think some of the landlord and tenant acts in this country are a disgrace. I think they protect the people who own the homes, as opposed to the people inside the homes who get evicted. I think there's a multitude of factors at play here. At the end of the day, I think the most—

[*Translation*]

Mr. Yves Lessard: Be more specific. Is it a question of—

[*English*]

The Chair: Mr. Lessard, I'm sorry...

[*Translation*]

Mr. Yves Lessard: Is it a matter of education or is it a question of resources?

[*English*]

The Chair: Mr. Lessard, I'm sorry, your time is up.

Before I go to Mr. Martin, I just want to remind all committee members that this is a really important study we're undertaking. Witnesses have come in, and they're here to answer our questions. I would ask that, on both sides, we all keep our talking and discussion down to a minimum, if we could, including with our staff. We'd all appreciate that.

We'll go to Mr. Martin.

Mr. Tony Martin: Thank you very much.

I bring greetings, Peter, from Megan and Jean, who were happy to see you are coming before the committee today, because they, of course, have a great amount of respect for the work you do out there. Certainly, I do as well.

We have an Indian friendship centre in our own community, as you know, in Sault Ste. Marie, and it's doing a phenomenal job with very little, providing in so many ways and trying their best, from child care to health services to counselling for young people particularly struggling with addictions and that kind of thing, and certainly dealing with the poverty issues in Sault Ste. Marie: housing, income security, food security, and that kind of thing.

I heard you talk a lot about some of the challenges confronting urban aboriginal people. I guess you've heard we're trying to put together a report for the government that would indicate very clearly the role the federal government should play. This is your chance to share with us.

Are there one, two, or three specific things or priorities that you think the federal government should get at right away, to address and to relieve poverty in your community?

● (1655)

Mr. Peter Dinsdale: I think the single biggest barrier we've had to really effective and multi-faceted programs has been this jurisdictional conflict that exists in this federation between the roles of the provinces and of the federal government with respect to aboriginal peoples.

Section 91.24, as you know, has responsibility for Indians and land reserved for Indians, and the provincial division of powers is allowed in social programs that take place. As a result, when an aboriginal person moves to a city, the debate rages. Who's responsible for that intervention? Is it the federal government? The federal government, in fear of actually showing they have responsibility, tinkers on the edge of the program they should provide.

Our program is a notable exception. We've been around since 1972. There are others.

If half of all aboriginal people live in cities, and we're spending one-tenth of the total envelope for urban aboriginal issues, you know something is happening. They're not reaching people where they live.

The provinces aren't picking up that slack. The provinces remain wary of acknowledging jurisdictional responsibility for those populations. As a result, we continue to tinker on the margins of what needs to get done. We don't have a strong or effective strategy reaching people across the country.

I appreciate that this is a pretty big issue for this committee, talking about tackling poverty. If you think about the impacts on the ground of service providers trying to coordinate responses and to have access to resources, this always remains an issue. If you have a favourable government in Ontario, we'll have tons of programs in Ontario; if we have an unfavourable government in Saskatchewan this year, we'll have very little happening because of the lack of provincial engagement in Saskatchewan. Across the federation, it really becomes difficult to have real, systemic approaches to poverty reduction.

I think that would be the biggest thing. If I had a wish list and if I was in your moccasins, that would be an incredible contribution that could be made. More practically, and on the ground, I think you need to make sure the existing programs are reaching people where they live. The aboriginal human resource development strategy, now called ASEP, is not going to reach the majority of people living in urban areas, because you continue to flow the funds through a first nation and Métis settlement model solely. I'm not saying it's not appropriate to partner with them. Absolutely, it is, but you need to make sure interventions are reaching people where they live in the cities and towns across this country.

Mr. Tony Martin: Are there any obvious success stories out there that you could point us to?

Mr. Peter Dinsdale: I think there are more frustrations than obvious success stories. I don't want to be a doom and gloom witness, but from our experience, we've had to really patch programs together as best we can because of the lack of coordination that exists. Where there are urban aboriginal employment training programs through AHRDA, they have been very successful, but there are far too few.

We need more aboriginal post-secondary graduates. We have a number of innovative alternative school programs to help people who have dropped out of the public education system get back in and finish. They are a tremendous success. If there's one investment we can make across the country that's going to make an impact, it's that one.

The challenge is the level of provincial concern about becoming engaged and leading as best they can. We think the federal government should lead in this regard to help people finish high school. That is probably the one most successful intervention this committee can recommend to address poverty, not just this year but for a generation.

Mr. Tony Martin: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Mr. Komarnicki.

Mr. Ed Komarnicki: I'd like to take up that point. I have seven first nations in my constituency. In fairness to the communities, they have relatively good schools, and they start out relatively good as far as the numbers of students. But when you get to graduation night, there are quite a few less who make it that far. Notwithstanding that, it's good that you've gone that far.

I generally find that a greater proportion of females than males get to that place, which seems to tell me that there are some issues that need to be addressed. I realize some of that may be a generational thing and it may take time to address. I know Conrad alluded to that somewhat and didn't quite finish.

You were talking about some of the things you see that could be beneficial to changing that around—the programs you might suggest, and the timeframe within which you see that evolving or happening. Can you elaborate on that?

● (1700)

Mr. Peter Dinsdale: It's interesting that sometimes we get asked how long it will take to turn some of these things around. I think there are a couple of perspectives.

First, a number of status Indians have finished high school and have been accepted at universities, but they can't go because of the cap on post-secondary funding. One of the things you can do very quickly to increase the number of first nations status Indians graduating high school is to fund those who are ready to go. They're there, and there are artificial caps. As you know, there's a 2% cap on growth, and there are more students ready to go than money.

In addition, if you're going to focus on one group within the aboriginal community it would be single aboriginal women, because you're going to help their children and entire families move forward. But aboriginal men have the lowest graduating rates in urban areas. Statistics show they have the most to gain from graduating. If they graduate, their jump in income is much more than for aboriginal women who do the exact same thing. So I think there is some disparity in the data.

It's going to take at least five years. If someone is coming into grade 9 right now and you want them to finish high school, you need the supports in place now to help them through. When they struggle through grade 10, at a lot of first nations schools, depending on the proximity to urban areas, the children have to move. I know in Ontario a lot of the kids from the north move to North Bay and are put in foster home-like situations. They go to school and end up dropping out of grade 10 because of the integration and all the challenges in leaving the reserve to come to the city—all those kinds of issues.

You want to put programs in place now to help those children finish school, get their high school diplomas, and move on. So the time scale at a minimum is five years. You'll need to have some turnaround time to get those programs up and evaluate and strengthen them across the country. So you're looking at a five- to ten-year window to seriously address the kind of education gap that exists today.

Mr. Ed Komarnicki: What do you suggest could be done differently from how it's being done now on that specific issue?

Mr. Peter Dinsdale: There are two things. First you need to fund alternative education models to get kids back in after they have dropped out. Education is a lifelong process, so that's one of the things we need to examine.

Second, I think there's a disincentive for a lot of public school systems to graduate aboriginal kids. They get their tuition I believe in October, after the kid gets there at the start of September. If the kid drops out in November, the school keeps the tuition.

We think there should be an incentive to graduate children once they come into those schools and in public school systems across the country. I appreciate this happens differently across the country. But there are far too many schools where it's a disincentive to keep crowded classrooms by having aboriginal students in there. Once you have the tuition for the year, there's no incentive to graduate them.

I'd prefer to support those post-secondary institutions that are graduating our kids. It's far better to have them graduate from a public education system than come through our friendship centre alternative school or another program, for any number of reasons. Those are two specific interventions that could have an impact.

The Chair: You have 30 seconds.

Mr. Ed Komarnicki: Go ahead. You had a comment to make.

Mr. Conrad Saulis: The one thing I want to add to what Peter was saying is that when we go to school as first nations students, we learn very little about ourselves. Curriculums contain very little about first nations, Métis, or Inuit. Curriculums need to change; they need to be more inclusive. A lot of students just can't relate to a lot of things they learn. What is in there is generally negative and doesn't reinforce students to want to stay in the school system. So curriculums do need to change throughout the country and be more cross-cultural.

Mr. Ed Komarnicki: Mr. Chair, I guess this is a good place to stop.

The Chair: It is a good place. Thanks.

We will go to Mr. Savage for three minutes.

Mr. Michael Savage: Thank you, Chair.

Thank you very much. You've given us excellent presentations on some very specific ideas.

You presented to the Senate's anti-poverty report. You're quoted in here on a couple of occasions, and I'm sure you had a lot to do with some of the recommendations that were made.

In one recommendation in particular, recommendation 68:

> The committee recommends that the federal government require an Aboriginal working group to identify priorities for urban Aboriginal people and designated funding for this purpose within all federal funding to communities to address housing and homelessness.

Another thing the Senate report did that we've been getting into is to look at this issue of the cost of poverty. Some people say we can't afford to address poverty. It has become very clear that we can't afford not to address poverty. There's a quotation here on the homelessness section, from somebody saying:

> People should be pushed to do something simply out of humanity, but if you want to talk about money, it costs $48,000 a year to leave someone on the street. It costs $28,000 a year to house them.

You talked about the importance of not just transitional housing but actually building housing. Do you have anything that you want to add along those lines about the cost of actually addressing these issues versus the cost of not addressing them?

● (1705)

Mr. Peter Dinsdale: We often think there are different economic frameworks as well. Without programs such as friendship centres or drop-ins to help kids keep out of trouble, not get into drinking, not get into crime, not make more babies than they need to...what's the cost of keeping a kid in jail for a year versus having a program that will help provide services to him or her?

I think it is, in part, common sense in terms of the economics. The challenge is that you don't want to run structural deficits—no one does—when we ask folks to invest heavily in any kind of housing problems. Even though there are downstream investments and savings, no one is going to take from Corrections today to fund CMHC today for savings downstream tomorrow.

It's a real challenge; I appreciate that. There's always a political price to be paid for these decisions. I think the prudent thing is to graduate as many children as you can—I keep coming back to that—and to find homes. A housing first approach is certainly valuable, because they can't get a job and have a home; they can't finish school if they don't have a place to stay. I don't think there's anything to add that's new or unique to that, but certainly just to endorse that concept.

Mr. Michael Savage: What if the committee recommended a significant increase in funding for the aboriginal friendship centres to address poverty?

Mr. Peter Dinsdale: Well, we were going to wait to get to that later. Certainly one of the things you can do is to look at the funding challenges. We've been at the exact same funding level in friendship centres since 1996, the last time there was departmental spending review of any significance. We received a 25% reduction in our funding program, and we've been at the exact same level ever since.

I know there has been a lot of talk about MPs and senators and cabinet ministers having their salaries frozen. These front-line service providers have had their salaries frozen since 1996. It has been a 50% reduction in real terms in today's dollars.

These agencies are really having tremendous challenges, based on those kinds of numbers, to provide long-lasting services that have an impact to prevent poverty, to prevent these kinds of downstream investments that are going to be required in justice and health care and all these other areas.

We'd be happy to provide a brief in terms of the funding challenges and for the committee to consider recommendations based on that.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Lobb.

Mr. Ben Lobb (Huron—Bruce, CPC): Thank you.

Peter, you mentioned the caps at 2%. There's a significant number of young people who would like to go to university; however, due to the caps, they're unable to attend.

Do you have any idea, across the country, or have you done any research on how many people we're talking about here? What are the numbers?

Mr. Peter Dinsdale: I heard National Chief Atleo talk about the need for 65,000 more graduates to close the achievement gap between aboriginal people and non-aboriginal people in terms of university completion rates. I have no reason not to believe his numbers on that.

Mr. Ben Lobb: I can see that. That is a “want”, right?

Mr. Peter Dinsdale: Yes.

Mr. Ben Lobb: They would like to do that, to close the gap. But in fact speaking specifically to what you mentioned there in the cap, is there any idea of how many have applied that are unable to get the funding? Is that number available or out there?

Mr. Peter Dinsdale: They apply to their first nations. It's outside our purview. I think our challenge is that we deal with the results of when they're turned down, when they don't go to universities and they're in our communities. It's not the kind of research we do in terms of how many applied and from where they were turned down. So, sorry, no, I don't have that data for you.

Mr. Ben Lobb: These are obviously intelligent young people who have, in some cases, gone against the odds and have kind of risen to the top.

Mr. Peter Dinsdale: Yes.

Mr. Ben Lobb: How is the apprenticeship program working there? Our previous guests talked about the Métis construction industry that they've been able to establish. I'm curious how the partnering is going with corporations and other firms, because often times there are co-ops or apprenticeships in there. How is that relationship?

Mr. Peter Dinsdale: I think, again, the urban aboriginal focus hasn't been there, so we haven't been able to develop the relationships that others have in order to close some of those gaps. We've recently engaged in a partnership with the Electricity Sector Council, particularly in Goose Bay, Labrador, to work with them to identify 20 apprentices to be trained in some of the new developments they have to work in that industry.

We're beginning conversations with the Aboriginal Human Resource Council to look at a national trades strategy, a partnering with our community agencies to do pre-employment programs and then to match with employers. There are also opportunities even with folks like the Home Depots of the world and others that want to do national aboriginal hiring. They're looking for a partner to identify people and bring them through pre-employment programs.

The challenge is capacity. If you don't have the resources, have people to make those relationships, engage them long term, have the relationship with the local centres, develop the pre-employment programs and see them through, these things don't happen by themselves. But we're trying to engage the number of partners that we can.

That's why programs like ASEP and others are so important, because they provide the ability to do those exact things. What should be a focus is getting people jobs, those who are ready and willing to move on.

● (1710)

The Chair: Thank you.

That's your time. It flies, yes.

Mr. Lessard, please.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Yves Lessard: Responding to a question from my colleague, Mr. Martin, you said that there was more frustrations than successes. Allow me to phrase my question this way because I have always been very close to Aboriginal communities and I remain so. I am godfather to eight children as I have worked in health services, and so on. I also know that Ms. Folco has worked with Aboriginal communities as well. We get the impression that problems are never ending and that we shall never see the light at the end of the tunnel. The federal government has a fiduciary responsibility over Aboriginal communities. At the same time, we were apprised of the dramatic and scandalous situations that were described when we visited the regions and the major cities of the country.

I would like to hear you speak briefly on this subject. What is going on? Given all our investments and our efforts, it seems that we have gone nowhere in resolving the problems that you have described earlier.

[*English*]

Mr. Peter Dinsdale: Well, today I had the privilege of being with the Minister of Indian Affairs at a reception to mark the 50th anniversary of the change in the Elections Act for aboriginal people to vote in this country. Now think about that. When my father was born he couldn't vote in this country.

We're not that far from the Government of Canada, in these buildings, talking about how to kill the Indian in the child. We're not that far from residential school attempts... We're not that far from where people were not able to go to universities, or to hire a lawyer to fight their claims. In all honesty, we have about 50-some years of freedom from direct assimilation attempts.

I'm not much of an activist, but I think after any cursory review of Canada's history you have to come to that conclusion. It wasn't until the Indian Act amendments of 1951, a little bit later in the fifties, where these direct assimilation attempts stopped. Then there was a passive kind of assimilation. There wasn't much of a... You weren't trying to help us succeed, but you also weren't doing much to stop what was occurring in the past. The last residential school didn't close, of course, until the 1980s, I think, although most of the worst of them had been done by then.

But it wasn't until the 1980s that something began to switch. It was a constitutional conversation—of course, you could talk about the white paper of Jean Chrétien and others—which really began to raise a new political consciousness and passive support came. They really didn't want to be helpful, but somehow with the constitutional amendment, subsection 35(1), of course—existing aboriginal treaty rights are hereby recognized and affirmed—with the Penner report, the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, there is momentum all of a sudden. There also was the apology and even the alleged endorsement of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

All of this is a shift. Kelowna was a shift. Kelowna couldn't have happened 15 years ago. The mentality wasn't there. So I think this country is making a shift. And it's a very short window we've had. We've had about 10 years of active support. It's going to take more time.

I don't think all Canadians are ready to support aboriginal issues and programs. I think there's a lot of racism, a lack of understanding in this country still.

Chair, I'm answering too long. I apologize.

The Chair: No, that's all right. Go ahead.

Mr. Peter Dinsdale: It's amazing, though. I think that in historical perspective, it hasn't been that long. I'm 36, so all my life I've seen all these active supports. I haven't gone through the battles that my president has and others have. They've been through all this, but they see where we come from and I see where we're going to go. I think we're going to get there. We have strong leaders. More and more people are getting educated. More people are joining your parties and are being engaged in your political processes to help change from the inside. I think by working together, by focusing on this, we'll get there, but we need to deal with people where they live, we need to deal with the issues they have, and we need to stop following these political principles that we're going to serve nations rather than serve people in cities where they live and help them cope with the day-to-day struggles they have. That's my soapbox speech.

● (1715)

The Chair: That was very good. Thank you.

Go ahead, Mr. Casson.

Mr. Rick Casson (Lethbridge, CPC): Thank you, Madam Chairman. I'll make a comment and then ask a question.

You talk about the urban population. I have no official aboriginal populations in my riding, but I do have a huge urban population in the city of Lethbridge. Some say it's as high as 6,000, 7,000, or 8,000. I have always encouraged them, and if they would get together, they could elect the mayor, if they wanted to, and run the place, but we have a little trouble getting them to do that.

I mentioned to you earlier, when I shook your hand, that the friendship centre in Lethbridge is a real model of success. It's brought the community together in a way that I haven't seen very often with other organizations. The business community, the college, the university, the municipal government—everybody's involved.

They came to see me recently, and their issue was student housing. The University of Lethbridge and the college have quite a few aboriginal students. The university, of course, has a Native American studies program that's very highly regarded. They indicated to me that the students will come, whether from the city or from the two large reserves next to the city, start university, and then just quit. They come and then they don't last very long. It doesn't take very long: by Christmastime, sometimes, they're gone. They think that if there were housing for them so that they could use public transit and other things, this dropout rate would improve.

Across Canada, is this a theme that you see or can comment on ?

Mr. Peter Dinsdale: It's something we see, absolutely.

I should tell you we partnered with Dr. Yale Belanger from the University of Lethbridge on a number of projects, so we work with your community. We're familiar with some of the challenges you have in your own community as well.

Across the country the rate of native dropouts, once they get to university, is a tremendous issue. I think there are two reasons for that dropout rate. I think some students have been pushed along through their academic career, and while they may have a diploma, they become assessed at a quite lower level and they're simply not prepared academically for what awaits them when they go to universities at an academic level. Also at the small-c cultural level of an institution, the game that universities can be makes the need for native student supports all the more important. There is a need for tutors, for after-class programs, for tea and bannock, for someone to speak your language, for somebody to talk with about the powwows and what's going on back home, and there's all the social isolation that occurs. The more of those barriers you can break down, the better.

It's been our experience that these students, when they're provided with the right supports, can take care of themselves, graduate, and be very successful. Our focus has always been putting a blanket of supports around them to resolve all those other issues they're dealing with and help them focus on their studies. Native student support programs are one of those things that help do that successfully.

Mr. Rick Casson: Good. Thanks, Madam Chair.

The Chair: Go ahead, Madam Minna.

Hon. Maria Minna: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you very much for coming today.

I listened to you list your priorities. I have a fair number of aboriginal people in my riding, although I'm not in the downtown core. But the city of Toronto, as you know, has a very large population of aboriginals. The friendship centre there is very good, but at the same time it is just overwhelmed, from what I can see.

So housing, child care, education, employment assistance, they're all part of the same parcel really, and I don't think you can do one without the other. You just said something that I thought was very interesting: let's stop talking about nations and serve the people in urban centres.

We spend so much time figuring out this nation thing, nation to nation, which is fine. I won't even go there. I know there are reasons we ignore one another. My sense is that urban aboriginal people are being lost in the shuffle, in the struggle between federal and provincial jurisdictions.

You mentioned the Kelowna accord earlier, and I'm not going there because it was something our former government signed, but with something of that nature, how would you break this ridiculous constant whereby provinces want to look after urban and the federal government the other? That to me is an artificial discussion. We should all be responsible to make sure it happens, since we have a very large number of young people who are the future of this country.

What parts of the Kelowna accord would you recommend this group look at and revive so we can move on? I just want to see us move beyond the constant discussion we have.

● (1720)

Mr. Peter Dinsdale: I think a couple of things are important. My words are sharp, but this is my frustration dealing with nation approaches, and it's not meant to be disrespectful to them.

Hon. Maria Minna: No, you're absolutely within your rights. Go ahead.

Mr. Peter Dinsdale: I'm from Curve Lake. I want my nation to do well. I think people in urban communities need some focus as well. I think one of the great successes of the Kelowna accord...we were not delighted with the outcomes because we felt it didn't deal with urban enough. That single aboriginal woman in downtown Winnipeg wouldn't have been helped all that well by having aboriginal school boards or Métis-specific curriculum. I think those are great things, but we wouldn't have seen more practical service delivery on the ground. I think it would have come over time.

I think what was really important about that process is that 14 jurisdictions agreed to an action plan. Really. And then aboriginal communities, the national aboriginal organizations, agreed. It was a long time coming. Now we can dispute some of the particulars of the accord, but I think the principle of working together, coming together and saying yes, here it is, here's how we're going to move forward... There's going to be another conference on this issue eventually. What government does, what priorities...will economic development and accountability be the priority and not education? Will it be health? It will differ, but something needs to be done, and that is true reconciliation.

When we met with Associate Chief Judge Murray Sinclair and talked about residential schools, I said the irony is what truth, what reconciliation would be is reconstituting the aboriginal peoples of this country who have been decimated by the first 150 years of this country. What would that mean? That would mean something like Kelowna. That would mean significant investments and partnerships whereby Canada, the provinces, the nation governments, and ideally the service providers and others who have a role in this would come together and say this is how we're going to solve these problems together.

I think that was the value of Kelowna, which was different. It was more of a collaborative approach, and I think that kind of thing would have tremendous value.

The Chair: Mr. Vellacott, please.

Mr. Maurice Vellacott: Thank you.

I appreciate your being here today, Peter.

My question picks up on some of the secondary and post-secondary education issues, and I appreciate your honesty with us. As committee members, we've asked frank questions of you.

I have a couple of reserves in my riding, and I'm connected with lots of others, as I did serve for a time on the aboriginal affairs committee, too. I hear from time to time—this is at the secondary level before we get to the post-secondary level, and this is from first nations people—that they felt, as you said, somewhat ill-prepared and not fully prepared in terms of the standard, if you will, at the university or the college where they went thereafter.

Some of it seems to get back, as best as I can then gather or determine from them...they felt that the bar was set lower on those reserve schools, or wherever they were, and sometimes there's a variety of reasons that this may have been. They seem to be quite concerned now about that having happened. Maybe at that time it seemed to be a good thing, with some of the affirmative action in hiring and so on, but particularly that was a problem at the secondary level.

I will get into post-secondary education. I've often had some of these first nations kids express concern. They're urban Indians now, if you will, but connected to a particular reserve. They don't get the funding for their post-secondary education.

I know some will say that it's because there isn't a big enough sum of dollars, period. In other cases, they will tell me it's because those dollars were used for health or for housing or for infrastructure or whatever. In some cases, they also allege other inappropriate spending.

Some of them have suggested to me that if they can access that money directly from the federal government, or in some fashion like that, rather than through the reserve, then there wouldn't be these accusations of favouritism, or that chief's family or that particular family on council gets it and they don't.

I guess those are the two questions: lowering the bar, and the issue of how you get the funding and ensuring that it gets to the students, the good students who need it.

Mr. Peter Dinsdale: On the first question, I think a lot of the education reintegration programs that were developed in the early 1990s had a lower standard, absolutely. I think it became readily apparent when people came out of them ill-prepared for whatever trade or job they were going into.

In the late 1990s and early 2000s I started an alternative school in downtown Toronto, partnering with the Toronto school board. Ultimately, Jarvis Collegiate was our host school, and credits and diplomas flowed through them. I'm not speaking ill of them, but the original idea was to take the basic level of programs, and we resisted.

We said, “Let's do the advanced level of programs. Let's have that as a standard. If people honestly can't meet the advanced standard, then we'll make accommodations. Let's not have the basic level as the default.” I think it's true that there is a general stream of consciousness that because of all these challenges and because they dropped out, or whatever, they aren't going to be strong enough academically.

We were pushing back against that. I think it's probably the same across the country. That's the default position unless you push back. That's the standard at which it is going to be applied.

What's your second question again? I apologize.

● (1725)

Mr. Maurice Vellacott: It's a matter of getting those funds—

Mr. Peter Dinsdale: I'm aware of the debate with Calvin Helin's recent idea of an RESP set-aside when a status Indian is born and it grows over the duration, or the recent study that they apply through... Maybe with this Speech from the Throne it's unclear how the post-secondary funding is going to flow ultimately.

I think what is important is that funds geared for education go to education, so I don't think block transfers are helpful. That's my own opinion. I think we should be focusing on academic achievement and graduating more people. I think it speaks to the larger lack of funding in communities. If they are allegedly taking it for other areas, then we need to ask questions about why that's happening.

I certainly agree that we need to make sure that funds targeted for education are spent on education. There's a variety of ways of getting that done. I only encourage that this occur through partnerships.

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

You've done a fantastic job of answering a lot of questions in a very short amount of time. I'm going to ask you one really quick question, just to follow up on Mr. Vellacott.

Are you finding, even anecdotally, that there is an issue with boys falling behind? We're seeing that in non-aboriginal populations, where girls are really excelling, where girls are graduating, going to university. Personally, I'm concerned that we have a problem with young men and with boys.

Are you finding that as well? We really just have a moment.

Mr. Peter Dinsdale: There's no question about it.

I've heard it from our provincial body in Ontario, where they have done a lot of work on young aboriginal women in sports and recreation education. They're seeing that they have been successful. Now they're saying that they have to focus on young aboriginal men.

We're going to publish a book this year about the urban statistics I've been telling you about, the education statistics I was talking about, on how young men are falling behind and we need to find a way.

It's not even anecdotal. We can show you the evidence that young aboriginal men are falling behind, and we need to ask for specific interventions.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Monsieur Lessard.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Yves Lessard: Madam Chair, I think that all our colleagues will agree to allow Tony to ask a final question given that he gave up his turn on two occasions.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you.

If everyone is fine with that, we'll let Tony have three minutes.

Mr. Martin, go ahead.

Mr. Tony Martin: Actually, I appreciate that.

Mr. Yves Lessard: *En français.*

Mr. Tony Martin: *En français*—that will be a challenge.

Thank you very much. I do have a question. I wanted to go back to a comment you made earlier. One of the challenges we're going to have with this committee is deciding on a measurement of poverty. There are a number of vehicles out there that have been used, and we'll be talking about those. You mentioned earlier the community well-being index.

Could you expand on that a little bit and why you think it's an important measuring tool?

Mr. Peter Dinsdale: I think it's an important measuring tool only because its numbers provide the numbers for us. It's a housing indicator of a core need and overcrowding. It's an employability measurement between unemployment rates and participation rates, income levels and education attainment. There are probably other successful or maybe more important data that could be made available. This is the data we have today, which is why we utilize it. It really helps to begin to compare where disparities exist across the country. We can share with the clerk our methodology for doing that.

Mr. Tony Martin: I imagine that would be great for our researchers, because they're working on a report for us, and they will make recommendations.

Mr. Peter Dinsdale: We have a whole chapter on methodology and would be happy to share it with you.

Mr. Tony Martin: Thank you.

The Chair: Great. Thank you very much, Mr. Martin.

Again, thank you to our witnesses.

The meeting is adjourned.

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