



HOUSE OF COMMONS
CHAMBRE DES COMMUNES
CANADA

Special Committee on Violence Against Indigenous Women

IWFA • NUMBER 003 • 1st SESSION • 41st PARLIAMENT

EVIDENCE

Thursday, April 25, 2013

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Chair

Mrs. Stella Ambler

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•(1810)

[English]

The Chair (Mrs. Stella Ambler (Mississauga South, CPC)): Good evening, everyone. Welcome to the third meeting of the Special Committee on Violence Against Indigenous Women.

Today we are very pleased to have our guest here, Lisa Hitch, from the Department of Justice. We're very anxious to hear from you. Thank you very much for being here tonight, after hours at that.

As you may know, you have 10 minutes for comments, and then we will ask some questions and have a bit of a back and forth, as per our prescribed formula, which we agreed on previously.

Again, thank you, and welcome. You may begin.

Ms. Lisa Hitch (Senior Counsel, Family, Children and Youth Section, Department of Justice): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Madam Chair, members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss an issue of grave concern to the Government of Canada and the Department of Justice Canada.

[Translation]

My name is Lisa Hitch. I am the Senior Counsel at the Family, Children and Youth Section of the Department of Justice Policy Sector.

[English]

In my brief opening remarks this evening, I'd like to set out an outline of three areas: the background to this complex issue; the scope of the Government of Canada responses to date; and, finally, some of the more recent Justice Canada responses.

Disproportionate levels of violence faced by indigenous women and girls, and in particular levels of violent victimization, have been of serious concern to governments in Canada for some time. As with the previous 1999 general social survey and the 2004 general social survey, the 2009 general social survey showed that aboriginal Canadians are three times more likely to suffer a violent victimization than non-aboriginal Canadians. Most of those are young women aged 15 to 34, and most of the violence is perpetrated by someone known to the victim, although aboriginal people are also more likely to be victims of violence by strangers. Aboriginal women are three times more likely to be victims of spousal abuse, seven times more likely to be victims of homicide, and unfortunately, it appears, victims of serial killers. My colleagues at Statistics Canada will provide more detail to the committee next week on the available statistics.

Beyond the statistics, however, a large number of reports and studies on violence against indigenous women and girls guide our work. Over the last few decades, these have ranged from the 1995 Royal Commission Report on Aboriginal Peoples through the 1999 Report of the Aboriginal Justice Inquiry of Manitoba, focusing on the deaths of Helen Betty Osborne and John Joseph Harper, to the work of the Native Women's Association of Canada and many others. Indeed, the 2005 report of the Ending Violence Association of British Columbia and others is entitled "Researched to Death". As the title would suggest, it is not alone in urging the need for action. Together, these reports represent a rich resource and background for the many actions taken by governments at all levels in the development of policy and funding of programs designed to address this violence, in particular because many include the voices of indigenous women, men, and children, speaking about their lives and experiences of violence.

Despite the many actions taken by governments in Canada at all levels, individually and in concert with one another and with aboriginal peoples and communities, recent Statistics Canada publications point out that violence against women continues to be a persistent and ongoing challenge, and one that is still considerably more dangerous for aboriginal women. One of the reasons is the complexity and interrelatedness of the root causes of the greater vulnerability to violence of aboriginal women and girls. Although there are commonalities in some instances, individual instances of violence are diverse geographically, culturally, and in situation.

Given the wide range of root causes for the violence, the way those causes interact, and the great cultural diversity, no single solution can resolve the violence for all first nations and aboriginal communities in Canada. The intergenerational cycles of violence and abuse that threaten aboriginal communities by factors such as their lateral violence, collateral damage on child victims and witnesses, and impact on the vulnerability of women and girls who leave their home communities will require time to effectively be broken community by community.

The Government of Canada has focused on making significant expenditures in a number of core areas to improve individual and community well-being, including in economic development, education, labour market participation, housing, health, family violence programming, policing, and other relevant areas. Government of Canada officials are engaged in that work in a number of departments and agencies, including Public Safety Canada, Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada, Status of Women Canada, Health Canada, and others. My colleagues from some of these other departments will be able to provide more details on some of those broader initiatives.

Much of this Government of Canada action is in partnership with aboriginal organizations and groups, the provinces and territories, and other stakeholders. They respond to the myriad studies identifying the root causes of violence in aboriginal communities and the additional vulnerability to violence of aboriginal women and girls. As an example, federal-provincial-territorial ministers in several portfolios have declared that finding solutions to violence against aboriginal women and girls is a priority.

● (1815)

In the Justice and Public Safety portfolio, at their November 2012 meeting, federal-provincial-territorial ministers approved an implementation plan for the 52 recommendations in the 2012 report to them from the Missing Women Working Group. That report set out findings on root causes, including research on serial sexual predators, identifying characteristics that increase vulnerability for victims, such as age, gender, perceived race, ethnicity, addictions, and mental illness. The report also discussed best practices in detecting potential serial murderers and strategies to identify and protect marginalized persons from becoming victims.

Ministers also directed officials to develop a framework to coordinate federal, provincial, and territorial responses to the higher levels of violence experienced by aboriginal women and girls across the law enforcement and justice spectrum.

Provincial and territorial ministers responsible for aboriginal affairs had earlier directed officials to develop a document on root causes of the violence, and federal-provincial-territorial ministers responsible for the Status of Women had adopted a declaration in 2007, in Iqaluit. The Government of Canada also provided \$5 million over five years, from 2005 to 2010, to the Native Women's Association of Canada for their Sisters in Spirit initiative, through Status of Women Canada, in response to concerns about missing and murdered aboriginal women.

When their research showed a disturbingly high number of missing and murdered aboriginal women across Canada, the government announced a further investment of \$25 million over five years, in budget 2010. This supported a seven-point strategy aimed at improving the response of law enforcement and the justice system to cases of missing and murdered aboriginal women and girls, and increasing community safety, as an important criminal justice priority.

This commitment included a number of initiatives at the RCMP and at Public Safety Canada, including establishing a new National Centre for Missing Persons and Unidentified Remains; enhancing the Canadian Police Information Centre database; creating a national

website to help match old or missing persons cases and unidentified human remains; and working with aboriginal communities to develop community safety plans, as those communities are best placed to establish priorities for effective change. It also included initiatives at Justice Canada, including support for the development and adaptation of victim services that are culturally appropriate for aboriginal people and can provide support for the families of missing and murdered women.

A number of important community initiatives have also been funded, including support for extending the Canadian Red Cross's Walking the Prevention Circle to Inuit communities.

We would also like to draw the attention of the committee to the recent compendium of promising practices to reduce violence and increase safety of aboriginal women in Canada. The compendium is an online resource developed by the Aboriginal Research Institute to support aboriginal communities seeking practical responses to violence in their communities, by allowing them to build on the experience of other communities facing similar challenges.

We know from the work of the Native Women's Association of Canada, the earlier work of Manitoba's Aboriginal Justice Inquiry, the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, and from the work of many others, that the higher vulnerability of aboriginal women and girls to violence is a complex issue. It requires coordinated action from federal, provincial, and territorial departments responsible for justice, public safety, policing, gender issues, and aboriginal affairs, working with aboriginal people and other stakeholders to develop more effective and appropriate solutions in each community to bring lasting change.

Honouring the women and their families requires government at all levels to know their stories, to learn from their circumstances, and to take action towards ending the violence and preventing further deaths.

Thank you.

● (1820)

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Hitch.

We'll now begin our first round of questioning for seven minutes.

Ms. Crowder.

Ms. Jean Crowder (Nanaimo—Cowichan, NDP): That's great. Thank you, Madam Chair.

And thank you, Ms. Hitch, for coming before the committee. We would agree with you that the case of murdered and missing aboriginal women is a serious one, and we would also agree that it's been researched to death; there is a real need for action. I know you addressed the root causes as well as some of the other measures that are in place.

One of the things I wanted to touch on was with regard to information gathering. Without good information it's often very difficult to develop good public policy. I want to touch on a paper called "Good practices in legislation on violence against women" done by the United Nations as a report of the expert group meeting back in 2008. One of the things the report pointed out was the importance of collecting statistical data. They made a recommendation that legislation should:

require that statistical data be gathered at regular intervals on the causes, consequences and frequency of all forms of violence against women, and on the effectiveness of measures to prevent, punish and eradicate violence against women and protect and support complainants/survivors; and

require that such statistical data be disaggregated by sex, race, age, ethnicity and other relevant characteristics.

Of course they say this information is fundamental for monitoring the efficacy of legislation. Of course we don't have legislation specifically, nor do we have a national action plan on violence against aboriginal women. Could you comment? I know you mentioned the police have established a National Centre for Missing Persons and Unidentified Remains, and that some data will be gathered as a result. Can you speak to what kind of data it will deal with? Root causes? Will it be divided by age, race, ethnicity? Will it look at evaluating the measures after the fact to see how effective the measures are?

Ms. Lisa Hitch: I can try. I will say that this question would most likely be better answered by both my colleagues at Public Safety Canada and at Statistics Canada. With regard to the statistics more generally, I believe not just that study but a number of studies emphasize the need for information gathering. There will, however, be limitations in the data. Statistics Canada will elaborate, I'm sure.

There have been some difficulties, as you know, with collecting information, specifically with disaggregating data on aboriginal identity. Although there are recent changes to the national CPIC, the Canadian Police Information Centre data collection system, which will allow police to better record information on aboriginal identity, there's always going to be difficulty in some circumstances with front-line officers. Their primary function is not to collect statistical data but to address criminal behaviour. They are not always going to be in a position to know the race and culture of an individual who's missing or murdered.

Making a judgment that's based on ascribing status is not going to be sufficient for anyone's purposes, and certainly where police can access that information from either the victim or from a situation where someone has registered status, or where family members provide that information, it can be entered, but data collection is going to be an ongoing challenge.

As I said, both my colleagues in those other two departments can probably elaborate on that more.

• (1825)

Ms. Jean Crowder: I guess a challenge we have is that without adequate data collection, what we have seen, accurately or inaccurately in the media, is an attempt to downplay the severity of the problem. Without adequate data collection it is going to make it a challenge to determine whether the measures that have been proposed are even having an impact.

What I understood you to say was that the issues around violence against aboriginal women and girls is not decreasing. If that's the case, and this money is being spent and these measures are being put in place, how do we know they're effective? Quite frankly, out of the measures you listed, with the exception of some work around community safety, I don't see most of those measures addressing the root causes of violence against aboriginal women and girls.

Ms. Lisa Hitch: My apology, but is that a question?

Ms. Jean Crowder: Yes, it is a question.

I guess what I'm saying is that we don't have information. We can't assess the effectiveness of the programs, and I don't see the list of what you gave us as addressing the root causes.

How are you going to determine that anything you've listed is being effective?

Ms. Lisa Hitch: With respect, in many instances there are a lot of studies that are showing the root causes. If you look at the backgrounder B to the original October 2010 announcement on the seven-step strategy for missing and murdered aboriginal women, it sets out some of the more commonly agreed on root causes. It then goes on to outline some of the Government of Canada's investments to address those specific root causes. I don't believe I can answer more than that on that particular part of your question.

When you're asking about the need for specific information, I suppose the problem will always be there. There are measures being taken to try to improve it as much as possible.

I think it is, conversely, a very difficult issue. Aboriginal identity is something that is very private to many people. They wish to control the designation of whether or not they are aboriginal and how they believe they identify themselves.

There will be difficulties with the police officers who are on the front line collecting information when they're there to respond, for example, to a domestic incident. It's not necessarily the first thing they can ask someone.

Ms. Jean Crowder: If you'll forgive me, Ms. Hitch, I wouldn't expect a front-line officer to have that as the first question when they're responding to a call, but there are ongoing investigations and whatnot.

Do I still have some time?

The Chair: I'm afraid not. Sorry.

Thank you, Ms. Crowder.

Mr. Goguen, for seven minutes.

Mr. Robert Goguen (Moncton—Riverview—Dieppe, CPC): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you for testifying and sharing your expertise.

My question is somewhat along the same lines. I don't know if it probes as deeply as the root causes of the disappearances.

There appear to be a fair number of resources dedicated toward preventing the deaths, and of course the disappearances, yet there appear to be a wide range of circumstances under which people are disappearing—indigenous women and girls have disappeared.

Have our studies permitted us to identify patterns, repetitive instances, or circumstances leading to disappearances? I don't know if it goes so far as root causes, but when you're doing investigations or you're an officer in the field, there should be some clues, tips, things to look for—flags.

Ms. Lisa Hitch: Yes. As any policy officer in government, part of my duty is to collect information that is publicly available. I include reports, studies, any information publicly available on an issue that I'm studying. In studying the issue of violence against aboriginal women, the cases of missing and murdered aboriginal women are extremely important. We had the NWAC study to start our work, but there are a number of other studies and an awful lot of information, which are available publicly, that give us at least a preliminary analysis of the range of circumstances.

As I said, the geographic distribution is quite extreme. There are significant differences in terms of cultural issues, and there are very great differences in terms of situation. The cases range from the victims of serial killers, as we've seen with the B.C. Missing Women Commission of Inquiry, through to domestic violence circumstances, family violence circumstances, cases where women have died either crossing highways, because it's the only way to go home, or have disappeared from highways. There are a lot of instances of women who were fully employed and are missing or murdered, in circumstances that were very different from the circumstances that were looked at in the O'pal commission. There were a lot of young girls who were going to school. There are a number of instances where people died of exposure. In order to understand the issue and to deal with the violence and to deal with the deaths, it's important to look at all of those circumstances.

• (1830)

Mr. Robert Goguen: It would go without saying that it would be important for this committee to review the references you've just made to those studies. Am I correct?

Ms. Lisa Hitch: We would agree. Yes.

Mr. Robert Goguen: Could you prioritize which ones we should start with? Are they so numerous?

You're the expert. You tell us, where do we start reading?

Ms. Lisa Hitch: I'm positive that your Library of Parliament people will also give you advice on that, but the department would be pleased to take it under advisement, if that's useful to you, to provide you with a list of the major reports we rely on.

Mr. Robert Goguen: That would be most helpful.

Thank you, Madam Chair.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Goguen.

Next on the list, for seven minutes, is Ms. Bennett.

Hon. Carolyn Bennett (St. Paul's, Lib.): Thanks very much.

To follow up on my colleague, Ms. Crowder, if it's measured, it gets noticed; if it gets noticed, it gets done. Without disaggregated data and without our really being able to track this, how do we know that any of these interventions are working?

In your national compendium on promising practices, how far along is that? What numbers are they using to fund...? A best

practice has to be working. It's not that it seemed like a good idea at the time. If it's a promising practice, it means something's working. How do you collect those, and how do you know if what people are doing is working?

Ms. Lisa Hitch: The Department of Justice worked with the Aboriginal Research Institute and with some 13 other individual contractors. We had information from a lot of communities that were applying for funding, not just to the Department of Justice funds but to other funds—that they were facing barriers and frustrations in setting forward a proposal and then getting feedback that it wasn't of interest. Part of that reasoning was that it appeared that a large number of communities were being forced to start from square one. They weren't aware of other promising practices in other communities.

Clearly, of course, as we've said, with geographic—

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: The community that's putting forward a promising practice has an evaluation that says this worked. The number of missing and murdered was reduced, or the support for families was increased.

My concern is like the parliamentary secretary's. The work of this committee is to fill in some gaps. We know we have to work in a holistic way, and I think we're concerned that when it's an FPT working group, the justice people from around the country and the public safety people are doing something else and the child welfare people are doing something else. At some point we have to be able to bring everybody together, because we know this isn't working across different government departments and across different jurisdictions. We're stuck. Clearly, we're not making progress if we don't even have the numbers.

Like the parliamentary secretary, I would like your advice.

We have all these root causes—the trafficking piece, young women fleeing abusive relationships in foster care—but I think there's also the discrimination and marginalization of indigenous women. Effective and unbiased policing and the culture of policing seem to be something the women talk to us about.

How would you go about this work, in that you're encyclopedic on everything that's been done already? How would you advise this committee to go forward?

• (1835)

Ms. Lisa Hitch: I would agree that what you're identifying is a concern. It has been identified in a number of reports and studies. It's also been identified in a number of federal-provincial-territorial committees. We are working to try to cut across the silos between sectors by looking at the effect—

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: Is a ministerial committee, a committee of cabinet, a group of ministers tackling this?

Ms. Lisa Hitch: Are you asking me whether there's a group of ministers who are addressing—

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: Is there a process within government to talk across government departments to deal with this?

Ms. Lisa Hitch: The process across government is more at the officials level, because what the officials are doing is finding that it's quite logical that we're overlapping and we're leaving gaps. Everyone is aware of that issue and is working to resolve it.

I think the one thing I would advise this committee, if I dared to, is that after many years the one conclusion I think most federal officials, and provincial and territorial officials, have come to is that it is not possible to impose solutions. This seems obvious in retrospect, does it not? They concluded that the important thing to do is to move community by community, asking communities to set their own priorities.

I think my colleagues from Public Safety will be able to expand on this next week. One of the reasons that the October 2010 announcement placed so much emphasis on the community safety planning process, which is being run by Public Safety, is exactly that: the community safety planning process goes into communities; it creates capacity. Of course you can't have—it's one thing we've always found—the same two people in every community having to manage four or five different departments at different levels of government. So they work on community capacity; they work on community meetings; they work on a community deciding what their priorities are. The idea is to go back to funders and ask for what they need, instead of what they're getting.

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: It seems that the women and families on the ground have some instincts about what's happening, and I think they feel they've not been listened to. How could we do that better? Maybe that's not for you, but it's for our committee to have a look at how the hunches and the instincts that exist within communities could lead us to some solutions. Is that what you're saying when you say go into the communities and listen?

Ms. Lisa Hitch: With respect, I understand the frustration. I think we all feel that frustration of being the sole voice, but I would say that it has been one of the most powerful aspects, as I mentioned in my opening remarks, and one of the reasons why we have certain studies that we rely on more than others. It's because they actually have the voices of the people who are living the violence. Their suggestions, their lives, their experiences are extremely valuable in trying to craft solutions. Those suggestions are not lost.

The Oppal committee just came out with the report called "Voices of the Families". There are other similar reports, and I would encourage the committee as much as possible to collect those, solicit those.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Hitch. That's great.

We'll go to Ms. Truppe next.

Mrs. Susan Truppe (London North Centre, CPC): Thank you, Madam Chair, and thank you, Ms. Hitch, for being here today for this important issue.

I have a couple of questions in regard to some of the things you said, and maybe you can enlighten us.

You mentioned that NWAC was given \$5 million from Status of Women Canada for Sisters in Spirit, and I think there was another \$25 million over five years after that. What does Sisters in Spirit do?

Ms. Lisa Hitch: The Sisters in Spirit initiative continues to this day. There's a little bit of confusion, I think, in that the Government of Canada funded it for five years, but it belongs to, and always has belonged to, the Native Women's Association of Canada. Sisters in Spirit, of course, continues to this day. The research that was funded by the government was the initial research to look at the root causes of some of the violence; it was also to collect information specifically on the cases of missing and murdered aboriginal women.

The NWAC was particularly invaluable in that, because there were, and remain, a lot of concerns in individual communities about cases of missing and murdered aboriginal women. The RCMP emphasized at all times...and I understand there are concerns, and certainly the Human Rights Watch report has mentioned some of those. I believe there's also frustration from the aboriginal policing side that many of these cases have never been reported. NWAC went out to do some of that original research. They came back with their numbers, and their numbers were the base for the government response in 2010. Their research was invaluable.

● (1840)

Mrs. Susan Truppe: Thank you.

You mentioned when you were speaking that there were a lot of initiatives that have happened, and are still happening, and there was a lot of federal funding that was provided. With all of these initiatives that you're aware of, is there one that worked better than another, or that is working better than another? Do you have a favourite?

Ms. Lisa Hitch: Again, it's really difficult to answer that question because the root causes are so varied. It's impossible to compare housing, shelters, economic development. Some of the large initiatives that have to be undertaken...even the family violence programming, which I'm sure my colleagues at Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada will expand on.

The one thing, again, that I suppose we would emphasize is that the community has the best mechanisms and the best ideas for change. This is why the Government of Canada worked with the Aboriginal Research Institute to gather the promising practices in the compendium.

There are significant problems with evaluation in the area of aboriginal programming. In many instances the programs are small; they're in small communities. To do an evaluation without identifying individuals is almost impossible. So there have been barriers to declaring something to be a best practice, because to be a best practice, it has to be fully evaluated. At this time, only two major programs in Canada have been fully evaluated, the Hollow Water program and the Rankin Inlet spousal abuse counselling program. The idea of promising practices comes out of a response to that frustration, that there are a lot of very interesting and very qualitatively successful programs in communities that can be built on and possibly adapted for other communities facing similar problems. The compendium is an attempt to bring together the first 140 of those programs, so communities have somewhere to start.

Mrs. Susan Truppe: Thank you.

You also mentioned that a lot of the studies were looking for, and showing, root causes. I think one of the colleagues opposite mentioned that, and you said there were some answers from the federal government for some root causes. I was wondering if you could give some examples.

Ms. Lisa Hitch: Certainly.

When the announcement went out in October 2010 that the government was adopting a seven-step strategy in response to the NWAC research results, the government felt it was extremely important to situate the \$25 million over five years, which was for specific initiatives within law enforcement and the justice system. Against the background of what else was happening across the Government of Canada, it immediately looked like that was all.

Backgrounder B sets out some of those root causes—the concerns with housing and living conditions, poverty, unemployment and dependence on social assistance, literacy skills and education, physical and mental health, interactions with law enforcement and justice systems that were outside that seven-step strategy, and the ongoing legacy of residential schools, among others—and what had been done by the Government of Canada to that point in those areas.

Since then there have been a number of additional announcements in subsequent budgets, including additional funding for, as I said, the Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada family violence prevention program on reserves, but there have been others, in terms of education and economic development.

Mrs. Susan Truppe: Thank you.

Do I still have time, Madam Chair?

The Chair: You have one minute and 20 seconds.

• (1845)

Mrs. Susan Truppe: Okay.

You mentioned lateral and collateral violence. Could you explain the difference between the two?

Ms. Lisa Hitch: Yes.

I'm sure a number of other witnesses will be appearing before you who can explain it better than I can. These concepts are repeated in many studies, including, I would say, one of my favourites—forgive me—the Four Worlds Center for Development Learning report on

aboriginal family violence, which was done for the Aboriginal Healing Foundation.

What they're talking about in most of these studies is that although there are similarities to violence against women between mainstream society and aboriginal communities, there are also some unique features. One of those is that the pattern of violence is not about one individual couple or household within a larger structure, but often it's throughout large parts of a community. The concept of lateral violence, which is mentioned, is a concept that is explored in other contexts, such as workplace harassment and other issues. In the instance of aboriginal violence, it's understood as being part of a psychological need of individuals who perceive they have no control to attempt to exercise power and domination over others within their group and generally over people with whom they have a relationship.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Mrs. Susan Truppe: Thank you.

The Chair: We're going to go now to Ms. Ashton for five minutes.

Ms. Niki Ashton (Churchill, NDP): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Ms. Hitch, I found your brief very interesting, and certainly the chronological look at major developments in this area.

I'm from Manitoba. I remember the Aboriginal Justice Inquiry. At our schools we learned about the murder and the tragedy surrounding Helen Betty Osborne. I also know about the repeated calls from people in my province and across the country for a national inquiry.

I'm wondering why that recurring call was absent from that briefing?

Ms. Lisa Hitch: I apologize, but that is a question that is better directed to my minister and his colleagues.

In general terms, I can say that to date Minister Nicholson has indicated that responding to missing and murdered aboriginal women is a pressing concern. During the debate for setting up this very committee, the then parliamentary secretary to the Minister of Justice indicated the government's hope that the committee will identify further practical solutions for the future.

Ms. Niki Ashton: Sure. I appreciate that. I certainly think we all look forward to having the chance to ask the minister that directly.

In addition, the latest FPT meeting produced a call from all provinces, with the exception of British Columbia, which is now in a provincial election, where ministers unanimously called on the federal government to call a national inquiry. That happened last Wednesday, and I think that's a very important point to add to that chronological briefing, because there is that official position that's now been taken by the provinces.

In terms of this file, I'm wondering which department is taking the lead.

Ms. Lisa Hitch: My apologies, but it really depends. I suppose my opening remarks went back and forth between violence against aboriginal women and the missing and murdered aboriginal women.

I would say that generally what's happening is that the departments are very well aware of the fact that no one department has the full mandate on this issue and that there's a need for everyone to work together. There are about six to seven departments that have been working quite closely on both issues for some time.

With regard to missing and murdered aboriginal women, the Department of Justice has the technical lead, although clearly not the substantive band-aid over the entire issue.

Ms. Niki Ashton: Okay.

A technical lead is encouraging, but families want to see action. The meeting of six higher officials behind closed doors certainly doesn't give the public signal from the federal government that someone is taking the lead and that it is of the utmost priority at that political level.

We raised the subject of Sisters in Spirit. What does Sisters in Spirit do now, since they've lost their funding?

Ms. Lisa Hitch: I should just track back for one second and apologize. To reiterate, the Government of Canada has said on many occasions, both Minister Nicholson and Minister Toews, that this is a priority for the federal government. So I do believe that the political statement—

• (1850)

Ms. Niki Ashton: Sorry, Sisters in Spirit or—

Ms. Lisa Hitch: No, that the issue of missing and murdered aboriginal women is a priority for the government. I think the political statement has been made.

With regard to the NWAC funding, as I was explaining, I think there is an understandable confusion between Sisters in Spirit and NWAC, because NWAC has been—

Ms. Niki Ashton: I understand, but I'm wondering, what does Sisters in Spirit do anymore?

Ms. Lisa Hitch: Sisters in Spirit is and always has been an initiative of the Native Women's Association of Canada, but what I mean is that the government's funding continues to NWAC. Although I understand people have mentioned that the Sisters in Spirit work is no longer being funded, what's happening—and I think my colleagues at Status of Women Canada and NWAC, I believe, who are scheduled to appear, will explain better—is that Status of Women Canada has continued to fund NWAC for the next initiatives past that original initiative. They've funded them for “Evidence to Action II”—

Ms. Niki Ashton: I understand. I'm also the Status of Women critic, so I'm—

The Chair: Very quickly. You have about 20 seconds.

Ms. Niki Ashton: Okay, wonderful.

I'm wondering if you could also share some statistics on the root causes with us that the Department of Justice may have access to: the levels of poverty on reserve, unemployment, housing shortages, the number of shelters that exist on first nations, the average level of

education that aboriginal women on and off reserve have, and other root-cause-related statistics—

The Chair: Sorry, I know it's difficult.

Could we maybe have a very quick answer to that?

Ms. Niki Ashton: Just by writing is fine.

The Chair: Oh, in writing.

Ms. Lisa Hitch: I could mention that those will be addressed in my colleagues' presentations next week, with the Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics and Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada.

The Chair: Thank you.

To Mr. Rickford now for five minutes.

Oh, he's passing it on to Ms. Block.

Mrs. Kelly Block (Saskatoon—Rosetown—Biggar, CPC): Sure. I can start.

Thank you so much, Madam Chair.

Thank you so much for being here.

I feel privileged to have been asked to serve on this committee to look at solutions for addressing this issue.

One of the questions I have might follow up with some of the comments my colleagues have made already. I too want to know a bit more. You've referenced Sisters in Spirit. We know there was an additional \$25 million.

You also talked about a seven-point strategy. You've referenced that a couple of times. I'm wondering if you would be willing to tell me a little more about that seven-point strategy.

Ms. Lisa Hitch: Certainly.

The seven-point strategy is essentially the content of the October 2010 announcement. There are a number of initiatives that were taken by Public Safety Canada. There was the setting up of the new National Support Centre for Missing Persons and Unidentified Remains at the RCMP. There were a number of related initiatives by the RCMP around the national website, which was launched last January. The website currently contains information on 740 cases. There's a great deal of hope for the website, in that it's modelled on similar websites that allow the public to provide tips for outstanding cases. The Ontario Provincial Police had a similar website, and they solved a fairly large number of cold cases through tips that were received through that website. There's a great deal of hope for that website.

The national centre is doing a lot of other work as well. Beyond that, as I mentioned, there are changes to the CPIC system, to add fields to the police data information. Then there is the community safety planning at Public Safety.

At the Department of Justice, we had a couple of initiatives. One was to prepare the compendium of promising practices. There's also additional resources that are being made available, on application, to provinces and territories and aboriginal groups, for victims services, for culturally relevant victims services for aboriginal people, and for supports for the families. We have a couple of instances of programs for supporting the children of missing and murdered aboriginal women.

There are also other funding programs for pilot projects to look at reducing vulnerability, specifically of young aboriginal women. There was money in the first years for applications for awareness materials to reduce cycles of violence in aboriginal communities.

• (1855)

Mrs. Kelly Block: Okay.

Is this seven-point strategy, and all of these tools and different things you've highlighted as part of that strategy, co-managed by the Department of Public Safety and the Department of Justice, or does this strategy just fall under the Department of Justice?

Ms. Lisa Hitch: The initiatives of the RCMP and Public Safety are separate from the Justice initiatives. There's a general coordination of information across the government. The seven-point strategy is not all the work the Government of Canada is doing in this area. There are initiatives at Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development. There are initiatives at Status of Women and at Health Canada.

These are additional initiatives. In many instances, additional funding was added to existing funds at the Department of Justice so there would be more money available for aboriginal groups.

Mrs. Kelly Block: Okay. Thank you.

The Chair: You are done. Thank you, Ms. Block.

Now on to Ms. Freeman for five minutes.

Ms. Jean Crowder: Actually, we're done.

The Chair: All right.

I think we may go to Ms. McLeod for five minutes.

Ms. Jean Crowder: That wasn't my understanding. If we're going to continue with a round, we'll take our spot. My understanding was that the last questioner was Ms. Block.

The Chair: Okay.

Ms. Jean Crowder: If you want to continue, we're happy to do that.

The Chair: It's been almost an hour, and I know it's tough to be on the hot seat.

We can either keep going or we can entertain a motion to adjourn.

Mr. Greg Rickford (Kenora, CPC): I move to adjourn.

The Chair: There is a motion to adjourn. All in favour?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Ms. Hitch, for being here and for starting off our study in such an illuminating fashion. We really appreciate it.

The meeting is adjourned.

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