HOUSE OF COMMONS
CHAMBRE DES COMMUNES
CANADA

Special Committee on Violence Against Indigenous Women

IWFA • NUMBER 002 • 2nd SESSION • 41st PARLIAMENT

EVIDENCE

Thursday, November 28, 2013

Chair

Mrs. Stella Ambler

Special Committee on Violence Against Indigenous Women

Thursday, November 28, 2013

● (1855)

[*English*]

The Chair (Mrs. Stella Ambler (Mississauga South, CPC)): Thank you for joining us again at meeting number two of the Special Committee on Violence Against Indigenous Women.

I want to thank our witnesses for their patience and apologize for keeping you waiting. We had some committee business to deal with and it needed to be done before you appeared.

I want to welcome you very much to this meeting. We're anxious to hear what you have to say. We are welcoming today, John Syrette, president of the First Nations Chiefs of Police Association, and John Domm, Chief of Police from Rama Police Services.

Welcome to both of you, John and John. We will begin by allowing you to speak for 10 minutes, and then we'll begin our rounds of questions.

Chief John W. Syrette (President, First Nations Chiefs of Police Association): Thank you very much.

Thank you, ladies and gentlemen, for giving this opportunity to the First Nations Chiefs of Police Association to address you this evening. My name is John Syrette. I'm the police chief of the Anishinabek Police Service, but I'm also the president of the First Nations Chiefs of Police Association.

I have with me Mr. John Domm, who is the police chief of the Rama Police Service in Ontario. He's formerly the police chief of the Nishnawbe-Aski Police Service, which is headquartered out of Thunder Bay, Ontario.

Our association, the First Nations Chiefs of Police Association, was incorporated in 1992. We bring together chiefs of police from self-administered police services and agreements that resulted from the 1991 approval of the first nations policing policy, the FNPP. The mandate of the association is to serve first nations police services in first nations territories across Canada by facilitating the highest level of professionalism and accountability in police services, all in a manner that reflects the unique cultures, constitutional status, social circumstances, traditions, and aspirations of first nations. Our membership is small. We have approximately 60 police chiefs who are part of our association.

You are probably aware that there are 38 self-administered, stand-alone services through the tripartite agreements under the first nations policing policy, located in the provinces of Quebec, Ontario, Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Alberta, and British Columbia. The communities we serve include distinct first nations, many with their own language and cultural traditions. The multiple challenges that our communities face are well-known to you and to most Canadians, specifically: poverty; unemployment; housing; access to medical and social services; substance abuse; literacy and education levels; and, lastly, the residential school legacy, among many other things.

There are significant factors that contribute to violence in our communities, including violence against women. As we know, many women leave their communities and our reserves for larger urban centres and become victims of violence there.

This committee's concern about the well-being of aboriginal women is welcome. We hope that your work will have some influence on the federal government's response to the conditions that lead to violence against aboriginal women, regardless of where it takes place.

In our view, addressing the root causes is the most important prevention strategy.

Chief John Domm (Chief of Police, Rama Police Service): We know from the 2009 Statistics Canada study, “Violent victimization of Aboriginal women in the Canadian provinces, 2009”, by Shannon Brennan, that aboriginal women were almost three times as likely as non-aboriginal women to report being the victim of a violent crime. The majority of violent incidents among aboriginal women were perpetrated by males acting alone, and as in most violent incidents, did not include the use of weapons or result in injury, except in cases of spousal violence where about half of the female victims reported being injured. Lastly, most violent incidents among aboriginal women were not brought to the attention of police or any other formal victims service, similar to victimizations, in general. Instead, most aboriginal women chose to confide in an informal source such as a friend or family member.

What does this mean for first nations police services?

First, our officers are trained in front-line responses to violence against women to the same degree as members of other police services in Canada, and this is critical. A specific focus on aboriginal women would enhance the training of all police on and off reserve.

In many urban centres, the police form partnerships with other agencies that support victims and women and girls at risk. This is an effective model and government is encouraging police to adopt it. But it cannot be applied in all the first nations policing contexts because we do not have these other partners to rely upon.

Second, there is value in a police service having the capability to respond proactively to violence against women. Few, if any, first nations police services have a dedicated position dealing with female victims of violence, but this does not mean that reports of violence are not addressed.

I'll use Treaty Three Police Service in Kenora, Ontario, as an example. Their abuse issues coordinator has a wide range of responsibilities including investigations; input into national systems such as the ViCLAS system, the violent crime linkage analysis system, which is a police tool for identifying those who commit crimes of violence; working relationships with crown attorneys, and other police services and agencies; community presentations and education; training programs; maintaining information resources; victim assistance; and reports to government.

Third, our association's work with other national policing organizations allows us to participate in professional development around front-line responses to violence against women and measures to prevent it. For example, the FNCPA is an ex officio member of the Canadian Association of Chiefs of Police board of directors.

Our members are also members of a number of CACP committees that deal with this issue: the policing with aboriginal peoples committee, the crime prevention committee, and the victims committee. These committees consistently shine a light on the situation of violence within aboriginal communities and allow Canadians to showcase their promising practices.

Chief John W. Syrette: Fourth, our relationship with aboriginal associations provides opportunities to speak with a unified voice on issues of concern that we all share, and bring consistent messages to our own communities.

As police, we provide more effective front-line responses when we are open to constructive change and are in tune with those who represent the priorities of aboriginal women. For example, we maintain a close working relationship with the Assembly of First Nations, which has identified violence against girls and women as one of its policy priorities. We are connected to the Native Women's Association of Canada, dedicated to the advancement and well-being of aboriginal girls and women through ongoing communication. I was able to present my police services' response to violence at their April 2013 national forum on community safety and ending violence in Edmonton.

The Native Women's Association's initiative, Sisters in Spirit, is one that the FNCPA is linked to because of its focus on ending violence against aboriginal women and its interest in police training and awareness around the issue of missing women and girls.

Keep in mind that the first nations police association is national and it has no authority over the operational practices of police services. However, we're able to serve individual communities through the resources we provide to our members. These include linkages with other associations, ongoing learning opportunities, information sharing on effective and promising policies and front-line practices, and a mechanism for consensus on the national priorities of Canada's first nations.

I'll conclude by referring back to the key point in the Statistics Canada report cited earlier. Most aboriginal women do not report to police when they are victimized. It is a point that also emerges in the work of the Sisters in Spirit and questions around the number of aboriginal women who are victims of violence.

Our message to women and girls in our communities and those around them is to bring incidents of threats and of violence to the attention of the police. Front-line police actions after the fact do not address the conditions that contribute to the crime, but the police response is a necessary part of the community's response to those who are victims of violence.

Thank you. We would be happy to take your questions.

● (1900)

The Chair: Good, because I think we probably have some. We'll start with Ms. Mathyssen for seven minutes.

Ms. Irene Mathyssen (London—Fanshawe, NDP): Thank you, Madam Chair. Thank you very much for being here, for providing this information. I think it's incredibly important.

As I'm sure you're aware, we've been over this ground many times in many committees. But I am hopeful that something concrete will come out of this, and real action.

Both of you spoke to what is happening in first nations communities. There was a reference to the police services in Kenora and the fact that they do indeed have a protocol in terms of response and also that front-line responses are a priority in terms of open and constructive change.

My question is in regard to what you need. Ms. Ashton has proposed that community action grants be made available to support the development of community action plans and emergency management teams in every indigenous community. I think that would incorporate your call for police training, the awareness piece, and the ability to respond in a practical and appropriate manner.

What do you think, in terms of having those grants and the development of community action plans? Would that in fact be helpful to you in the work that you do in order to make sure that women and girls are safe?

Chief John W. Syrette: That's a very good question. Currently, it's not a secret that many of our communities at times are in next to third-party management, where funding in a lot of our communities is limited, with so many mouths to feed and so little to go around. I think the priorities of a lot of our community leaders are the issues that we raised earlier—poverty, housing, and additional social issues—and having this type of funding made available would allow them to lessen their focus on the larger priorities by knowing that adequate funding can be provided to create those relationships and to better respond to the ongoing incidents of violence.

Our partners, I'm sure, are struggling from day to day with the limited funding they have. They struggle with staffing, minimal staffing, and normally when police need our partners, it's mostly after normal working hours. Additional staff would be wonderful—people we could rely on in the event that we're called to an incident of violence. Those partners are critical for us.

For years policing has always been the hammer and the nail, and we continue to hammer down when we would really rather not contribute to the number of our people who are currently incarcerated. I think a conservative estimate is that we make up approximately 4% of this population nationally, but we are grossly overrepresented in our prison population. I could see this actually impacting the number of people we would be incarcerating if we had that ability to intervene on the front end through education, through programming, and being able to convince our community members that violence shouldn't be accepted. But that's only going to happen through education and a belief that this is no longer acceptable. We need to work together to minimize it, and ultimately, hopefully, make it go away.

● (1905)

Ms. Irene Mathyssen: You've touched on something very important. In 2010 and 2011 the committee on the Status of Women travelled to Iqaluit, and one of the things that we heard loud and clear was that in family units where there was violence, the breadwinner was very often incarcerated because no one knew what else to do. By virtue of that incarceration, the whole family suffered. There was nothing to support the family and make sure they had an opportunity for healing. It was not just punishing the perpetrator, it was punishing the victims in a very profound way.

If you were writing this report, would you make sure that one of the recommendations was for that funding, that it be absolutely a part of what this committee proposes, to go forward?

Chief John W. Syrette: Absolutely.

Ms. Irene Mathyssen: I thank you for that.

I had another question. It touches on—and you alluded to it—the whole reality of poverty and what that does to communities, what it does to individuals, and the unmet needs within that community. Again, in the tour of 2010 we went into communities where the housing crisis was unspeakable, and there was no opportunity to provide shelter or support to women and girls who had experienced violence, because there was no extra housing.

Would an investment—again, we're back to an investment—in front-line services, in shelters on reserves, in northern communities, in rural communities, help to provide the kind of support you would like to see for women and girls experiencing violence?

Chief John Domm: I think, in short answer, you were speaking about providing shelters for women and victims of crime. I think shelters are vital in any community for any victim of crime, and certainly it's far more acute for those victims in northern communities. I used to police in the remote far north parts of Ontario, and that was a very true reality for the residents of those communities in northern fly-in reserves.

So yes, shelters would be a significant benefit for those people at their time of need, because there are very limited options for them.

Ms. Irene Mathyssen: Thank you, and again, should this be one of our recommendations?

The Chair: A very short answer, please.

Chief John Domm: I would support that recommendation, yes.

Ms. Irene Mathyssen: Okay, thank you.

We'll try to make sure that your wise advice is respected.

Chief John Domm: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll move over to you, Mr. Strahl.

Mr. Mark Strahl (Chilliwack—Fraser Canyon, CPC): Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

Chiefs, thank you for coming to speak to us today.

I think you mentioned there were 60 chiefs, 38 organizations, something like that. Maybe I have that backwards.

How many first nations police officers are there across the country?

Chief John W. Syrette: I don't have an actual figure, sorry.

Mr. Mark Strahl: Do you have access to it, and could you get it to the committee?

Chief John W. Syrette: I could, absolutely.

Mr. Mark Strahl: That's fantastic.

Could you maybe talk a little about how your association operates, and more specifically, how you collaborate with other police services to provide those services right across the country?

Chief John W. Syrette: I think our connection is with the larger associations, the Canadian Association of Chiefs of Police. Locally, many of our police services are involved with the local provincial-level association. Relationships are created, information is shared. With the creation and maintenance of those relationships, a lot of day-to-day issues are resolved in a more informal manner. We get a lot of great support from our municipal, provincial, and federal police services that we interact with.

● (1910)

Mr. Mark Strahl: I was very interested in this assertion. You were quoting a study, “Most violent incidents against Aboriginal women were not brought to the attention of police”. That being the case, how do you think your organization or other policing organizations can encourage women who've been victims of violence to come forward, to your organization certainly? Is there anything you're doing to change that fact?

Chief John W. Syrette: I think a lot of effort has been made to try to bring down a lot of old beliefs in policing. One of the things we talk about is the residential school legacy. Police were viewed in those days as the people who came and took the children away. We're still living with that. We're still trying to convince communities that we are there to support and help them. The residual effect of those beliefs is still common in a lot of our communities, so it's an uphill battle for us to convince them that we need to move beyond that. I think effective efforts and effective responses to the incidents of violence is only going to make things that much better, but I see it being a long road to get people to that level of comfort where they will pick up the phone.

Mr. Mark Strahl: In the 38 communities in which your members operate, is that as prevalent? Are aboriginal women more likely to come forward to an aboriginal police service, or are the numbers still, unfortunately, very low? Is there a disparity between whether that community was served by the RCMP or by a provincial police force, or whether it's served by a first nations policing authority? Do you know if there's any evidence that there are higher levels of reporting when there are incidents of violence?

Chief John W. Syrette: I don't think we have any evidence to show whether they're more comfortable reporting to a self-administered service or to the RCMP. I don't have any evidence of that, sorry.

Mr. Mark Strahl: That's okay.

In your own communities, then, maybe. You're both chiefs of police for one of these communities. Maybe just put on that hat, if you wouldn't mind, and speak to this. In your own communities, has it been static? Are you still finding this to be a problem? As these education efforts are rolled out, are more people coming forward? Is it staying the same? Is it worse? From your police service itself, what has your experience been?

Chief John W. Syrette: I think it's getting better. A lot of work needs to be done. I was offered a common figure a number of years ago whereby a typical young women in this type of situation, in a violent home, often has 30 incidents of violence before she picks up the phone and makes that call to the police. It's our goal that, the first time she musters up the courage to make that call, we're effective. Hopefully that will in turn spread through the community, that we are there for them. We hope that our response was a positive one and it gave them the resolution they were looking for.

I think we have moved it forward, but we still admit that we have a long way to go.

Mr. Mark Strahl: Is either one of you familiar with the family violence prevention program, and if so can you maybe speak to its efficacy?

The program has provided $24 million over two years for the program. Since 2006 it has supported 41 shelters across the country, provided shelter services for over 16,500 children and 18,000 women living on reserve, and offered over 1,800 family violence prevention and awareness activities in aboriginal communities.

Are you aware of these programs? How do you think they're doing, given that there has been a significant funding commitment over the last couple of years?

Chief John W. Syrette: I'll be honest with you: I have never heard of this, so it would be really difficult for me to comment on the effectiveness.

● (1915)

Mr. Mark Strahl: Have you, sir?

Chief John Domm: Regrettably, I'm in the same position. I haven't heard of it either.

Mr. Mark Strahl: That's good to know.

The Chair: You have one minute.

Mr. Mark Strahl: If you had to sum it up in one minute, which we have to, what would you say is the main challenge, or what are the main challenges, facing first nations policing services?

Chief John W. Syrette: I would say we're chronically under-funded, and I think the limited resources we do have we try to deploy as effectively as possible with the support of our partners in our communities. The young lady raised the issue of the grants coming forward for that sort of event, and that would be such a positive thing for us. It would allow us to create relationships and to build upon what we have now with the limited resources first nations services have and service providers in the community have. This would really help bridge that gap and allow us to create a better response mechanism, a more appropriate and lasting response to violence in our communities.

The Chair: Thank you.

We go now to you, Ms. Jones, for seven minutes.

Ms. Yvonne Jones (Labrador, Lib.): Thank you.

Thank you very much for joining us today.

This is my first time at this committee meeting. I'm filling in for a colleague.

I'd like to ask you to tell me a bit about what you do, what your job is. I know you're chief of the aboriginal police, but what community do you work in? What people do you serve? How many people work with you in providing that service? I'm just trying to paint a picture in my mind of what you do on a daily basis.

Chief John W. Syrette: My police service is responsible for 16 individual first nations in Ontario. We have a board, which has a representative from each one of the communities. The board identifies the priorities they feel the police service should be addressing in their community, and it's my job to try to develop a plan to provide an operational response to meet the needs of those individual communities. We have a lot of common issues, but each one of our communities also has its own priorities, which may differ from one community to the next. So as the police chief, I try to find the most effective way of deploying our resources to ensure that we address the concerns as well as we can.

Chief John Domm: I work in a small community about one hour north of Toronto, and we're host to one of the three significant commercial casinos in Ontario. So it's a bit of a unique setting whereby it's sort a of semi-rural setting on the shores of Lake Couchiching, which is just outside of Orillia, Ontario. The casino is a significant attraction to the city of Toronto and elsewhere, so it is a unique kind of blended community, if you will.

Certainly, primarily as the chief of police, I am responsible for overseeing the organization, overseeing the work that's done, liaising with the community, whether it's individual members, department heads or the political leadership, and things of that nature. Furthermore, like my friend John Syrette, I represent the nine self-administered first nations police services in Ontario at the provincial police chiefs association level. I participate on a couple of national committees through the Canadian Association of Chiefs of Police. When we do things like this, we really represent first nations policing. We represent our organizations, but we also represent and speak to the issues we have experienced and are trying to move forward on at a broader level. Whether it's a provincial table or a national table, we bring those issues forward.

Ms. Yvonne Jones: The work you do is certainly admirable. I have a large aboriginal constituency and I know the challenge that comes with policing, along with delivering other services in many of those communities.

The aboriginal policing information management system outlines that first nations policing programs are currently dealing with criminal incidents that are 3.8 times higher than the rest of Canada. It also includes certain key indicators: violent crime is at 5.8 times the national average, assaults are seven times the national average, and drug trafficking is at 3.8 times the national average. These are alarming statistics, no doubt, for any sector of our population in the country.

How do we starting bringing those numbers down? It's not that we haven't been bringing them down—I'm not saying that—but how do we bring them down even lower than they are today? What kind of resources do we need to start investing in first nations communities to make this happen?

● (1920)

Chief John Domm: I think it's a holistic approach in terms of tackling a number of social factors, from basic health, to clean drinking water, education, and proper housing. These are all basic, foundational core things that are required for any human, any family across Canada. Without these, it goes back to Maslow's hierarchy of needs. You've got to start with the building blocks and get that good foundation and move forward from there. Without the foundation, it's very difficult to try to go off on one stream and be entirely successful.

It's a very complex, very difficult question and proposition, and many great minds haven't figured it out yet today, but I'm encouraged that we're talking about it. I think it is very important, but I don't think it's any one specific area that we can tackle and say, “If we do this, we'll eradicate that.” I think it is far more complex than that.

Ms. Yvonne Jones: In the first nations communities that you currently provide policing services in, are you feeling that those basic needs are being met in those regions?

Chief John W. Syrette: I can't give a blanket statement, but I can say that some of our communities are very advanced and they are addressing some of the issues that John has raised. It's through the political leadership, and some of the leaders really see it as a priority that they need to fix, not only the community itself, but the mindset of the community in that this type of behaviour is no longer accepted. Kids need to have education as a priority. In those communities, I could see such a huge difference from the other communities within my police service that have not gotten to the point where they've raised these as priorities.

There is no one-size-fits-all. Each community is in its specific level of development, but I am confident and praying that at some point, when I ultimately retire from this job, we'll have moved it that much further, and together we'll have developed a process and a service that have addressed a lot of these.

Ms. Yvonne Jones: I guess we all know that first nations policing programs did not receive any increase in funding between 2007 and 2012, and the funding increase that you were given this year is probably not likely to keep up with inflation and will not deal, I'm sure, with the chronically underfunded programs that you have.

As an association, have you looked at making some estimations around financial resources, in terms of how you can be adequately funded to do the job better?

The Chair: We have time for a very, very short answer on that one.

Chief John W. Syrette: We've done a couple of sector studies, and out of that it showed that there is a lot of disparity from normal police services that are out there. We're hoping that at some point we'll have moved forward, but, again, 2013-14 was another zero year. It's not until 2014-15 that we see that modest increase of 1.5%.

The Chair: Over to you, Ms. Block, for seven minutes.

Mrs. Kelly Block (Saskatoon—Rosetown—Biggar, CPC): Could I actually trade my speaking spot with Ms. Brown, because she was just saying how much she wanted seven minutes? I thought I was just getting five.

The Chair: No problem.

We'll go over to you, Ms. Brown.

Ms. Lois Brown (Newmarket—Aurora, CPC): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Gentlemen, thank you so much for being here. I have a number of questions that I hope I ask in a functional way.

Mr. Domm, may I ask you this first? Can you tell us what the incidents of violence are that you are dealing with in your area? What percentage of the calls that you respond to are because of violence?

Chief John Domm: I can say when I was chief of Nishnawbe Aski Nation that looked after most of the fly-in—

Ms. Lois Brown: This is the one near Rama, is that correct?

Chief John Domm: Well right now, I'm in Rama. It's a fairly healthy community, and it may be noteworthy that it's fairly prosperous with the casino, quite frankly. It's not that the casino is the answer by any stretch of the imagination, but what it did was generate an economy. It generated a demand for other services whether they be public works services, waste water, or policing, fire, ambulance, etc. With that, it also then compelled an administration: greater finance departments, legal departments, HR departments, and so on.

This economy manifested and it provided everyone with healthy employment. The community invested in training and development for its own people to be able to fulfill these new positions, this new economy, if you will. It's become quite successful. As a result of that, it's very mainstream, if you will: everybody works, they're raising their kids, their families. It's a very healthy community. There are issues from time to time, but there are issues anywhere in any community in Ontario. It's a completely different set of contrasts or communities, if you will, from the community I used to work in.

That's why I started to talk about Nishnawbe Aski Nation area. I worked there for four years. In response to your question, if I can speed it up a little bit, in the north it was dramatically different. Most of our responses were to violent incidents. There was an extraordinarily high rate; sometimes tenfold the national rate of violence for some offences. It was a dramatic change. It is a dramatic reality, but it's still very real.

● (1925)

Ms. Lois Brown: So the percentage of calls that you get in the Rama area for violent incidents are comparable to any other police force across Canada, would you suggest?

Chief John Domm: I would suggest that it's very low.

Ms. Lois Brown: My riding is Newmarket—Aurora. So I'm an hour south of Rama, and I know there are hundreds of thousands of dollars—in fact, dare I say millions of dollars—that go through that casino. There is steady traffic from Toronto north. The children there are getting education. There is a great hospital in the Orillia area and of course access in Barrie for further services if they need it. So education and health care are taken care of. What you're saying is that people have jobs and that is making a difference in the choices they make in other areas of life. Is that fair?

Chief John Domm: I think it makes a dramatic difference, and I think it's a fairly fair assertion.

Ms. Lois Brown: Thank you very much. Orillia is a lovely city. There are so many small towns in that area that are beautiful places to live. All around Lake Couchiching is lots of lovely property, and people are privileged to live in that area, if I may say so.

Mr. Syrette, I need a little bit of clarification from your opening remarks, if you could help me out. I'm quoting from your remarks that you provided. In your bullet points, you say:

> The majority of violent incidents against aboriginal women were perpetrated by males acting alone.

The next bullet says:

> Most violent incidents did not include the use of weapons or result in injury, except in the cases of spousal violence, where about half of the female victims reported being injured.

I wonder, first of all, if you could define what you're saying there about most violent incidents not including the use of weapons or resulting in injury. Do you mean specifically weapons-related injuries, or am I reading that incorrectly?

I just wonder if you could define the violence there that you're talking about, because somehow there's a disconnect for me.

Chief John W. Syrette: It was actually the other John who did that part of the presentation.

Ms. Lois Brown: I'm so sorry.

Mr. Domm, you read that. Perhaps it was cooperative effort here, putting this together. I apologize.

Chief John Domm: Indeed it was, thank you.

It came directly from the Statistics Canada table. Those are the stats that we presented in this particular report. I think that you're talking about splitting violent acts with weapons and non-weapons.

Ms. Lois Brown: It just says here that, "most violent incidents did not include the use of weapons or result in injury". So if they didn't result in injury, how do you define them as violent incidents?

● (1930)

Chief John Domm: Sometimes it can be threats of violence, verbal threats.

Ms. Lois Brown: Okay, so it could be verbal abuse, then?

Chief John Domm: That would account for a significant amount.

Ms. Lois Brown: So you would include verbal abuse in that?

Chief John Domm: I would include verbal threats of criminal violence, yes.

Ms. Lois Brown: All right. I thank you for that clarification.

I want to go back to a witness statement that we heard last week. We heard from the Hollow Water First Nation in Manitoba. A woman who was our witness said:

> There was a time when it was okay for women to be treated in that way, to be physically abused, to be sexually abused and all that comes with that. My community had developed this attitude that women were to blame.

And she went on to talk about how the women in the community had made the decision to stand up and say that this was no longer acceptable. Can you tell me, in your experience, when that was acceptable? Across Canada, when was it acceptable? Is there a turning of the tide with this being discussed?

The Chair: Give us a quick answer to that question, please.

Ms. Lois Brown: How can the government deconstruct this?

Chief John W. Syrette: I think there's been improvement. I can't say there was a day that was the turning point. I would suggest that individual communities move forward at their own pace. Some of them may still be living in an environment where that is acceptable. I'm hoping that through ongoing intervention and education we'll all move to the point where we recognize that this is no longer acceptable behaviour.

The Chair: Thank you.

Over to you, Mr. Saganash.

Mr. Romeo Saganash (Abitibi—Baie-James—Nunavik—Eeyou, NDP): Yes, she's going to—

The Chair: You're going to trade your time with Ms. Ashton. Thank you.

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

Thank you very much, Chief Domm and Chief Syrette, for joining us, and thank you for your work.

I have the honour of representing Churchill, which is northern Manitoba. I know there are many leaders and community members who look to your work, especially now that autonomy in policing has been granted to first nations in Ontario. Where we are, that's a model people would like to follow. Unfortunately, the federal government is not at the table to engage in these conversations seriously.

I'm also aware of the huge need for policing in communities that I represent, and the first nations that I represent. Through your presentation, I've had a number of flashbacks to community visits or casework. I remember being at Red Sucker Lake, an isolated Oji-Cree first nation that is very close to the Ontario border. There is no RCMP base there. It's only fly-in, and when people need to be apprehended, they have to use the band office to do it. That's been vandalized as a result, and they've had to bring people in during working hours. These aren't conditions that community members or incarcerated people should have to deal with. There's a failure in our federal system when first nations people don't get the same kind of services as other Canadians.

I appreciate the focus you've given to violence against women and how your work is connected to that. A few months ago, I put forward a motion in the House of Commons calling on the federal government to bring forward a national action plan to end violence against women. This hasn't come out of thin air. In fact, the United Nations has asked Canada to bring forward a national action plan, because unlike like-minded countries, we don't have one. My motion put forward guidelines. It's not a prescription, but it puts forward guidelines and it includes specific attention to aboriginal women.

It also indicates that in order to enforce and implement an action plan, human and financial resources must be earmarked to carry out the action set by the plan. This motion is garnering a great deal of attention, and it is hoped that the federal government will comply with the United Nations request, and also with the need for a national plan, which is expressed by many organizations, women, and men across the country.

Given your work, not just in Ontario but across the country, do you believe that a national plan and a national response to violence faced by women is important?

● (1935)

Chief John W. Syrette: Yes, absolutely. Again, when we talk about the education of our community members, I think this is unacceptable. This action plan would be a great statement of the leadership on a national basis that this is a priority, that this needs to be addressed and is no longer acceptable, and that the Government of Canada is going to do everything they can to stop violence in our communities, I think that would be a wonderful idea.

Ms. Niki Ashton: Thank you very much.

Mr. Romeo Saganash: How much time do I have, Chair?

The Chair: You have one and a half minutes.

Mr. Romeo Saganash: It's my turn to welcome you and to thank you for your presentation.

Chief Syrette, you mentioned the view that people in our communities have of the police. I think it's still true today. In my language, [Member speaks in Cree] means someone who takes you away and puts you away, and [Member speaks in Cree] means someone who arrests you. In our concepts and language, we still don't have the notion of service and protection. I guess we're still a long way from that.

You mentioned in your presentation the lack of reporting in communities by women. You said, “Our message to the women and girls of our communities, and to those around them, is to bring incidents or threats of violence to the attention of police.” I totally agree. It's a major preoccupation.

Above and beyond a national plan, what particular aspect should you insist on? Awareness? I've worked a lot in human rights education around the world. I think one aspect is awareness, and in that discussion, what about the men?

Chief John W. Syrette: I think the perpetrators need to know that this isn't acceptable, but I also think there has to be a mechanism to provide them education and address why they are making these choices This isn't something they learned in school. This is something they've inherited, and it's unfortunate.

But I think that if there were a way, through anger management and a number of other programs, through education, and through our cultural beliefs, to use our culture to convince these men making these bad decisions that this isn't acceptable.... This was never in our teachings, but we need to somehow convince them that we have to move beyond the status quo and that this behaviour isn't acceptable.

As a community we can't ostracize them. They're part of this community. They made a bad decision. I think that as a community we also need to help them and to help fix them: that they're not going to jail, that they're actually going to address the root cause. That's my hope.

The Chair: Thank you.

Over to you, Ms. Block.

Mrs. Kelly Block: Thank you very much. Let's hope that I'm not too challenged to stay within five minutes.

I want to thank both of you for being here this evening. I appreciate the presentation you gave to us, and I also appreciate the dialogue we've been having so far.

In your opening remarks, you made this statement: “The communities we serve include distinct first nations, many with their own language and cultural traditions.” I also appreciate the observation you made in an answer to a question from one of my colleagues in regard to different first nations having various capacities to deal with some of the issues, based perhaps on their economic development and some of the advantages they might have, perhaps in terms of having businesses on reserve.

Part of that leads to the question that I want to ask you, because I'm aware that the first nations policing program is based on a principle that first nations should decide what kinds of policing arrangements are best suited to their communities. I imagine that some of these programs or the services that are provided also depend on the capacity of a community. I'm wondering if you could explain or describe for me the process for consulting aboriginal communities before an agreement is signed.

● (1940)

Chief John W. Syrette: There has to be a belief and a statement by the community on which direction they would like to go. If it is a self-administered police service they would like to know why a self-administered service is better than what we have now.

I'll use the province of Ontario as an example because I'm more familiar with Ontario. The Ontario Provincial Police have run the Ontario First Nations Policing Agreement for a number of years. A lot of our communities that are currently policed by my service fell out of that OFNPA agreement as a hope that they would have a more hands-on control of how policing is provided in their community rather than an organization out of Orillia saying, “Here's how it's going to be offered to you and you have to accept it”. This way, having that ability to help direct the service and what they see as their priorities gives them a feeling of ownership. That's key to them accepting the police service over something that's been mandated on them.

Mrs. Kelly Block: Thank you.

My second question follows up on that.

You also said in your opening statement that, “There is value in a police service having the capability to respond proactively to violence against women.”

I believe you used an example of a police service that is actually working very well, the Treaty Three Police Service in Kenora, Ontario. You went on to describe their abuse issues coordinator and the wide range of responsibilities that this coordinator has. My assumption would be that you've raised that because it would be seen as perhaps a best practice or perhaps a model that might be shared with other first nations and police services when they're looking to build capacity.

Is that in fact the case? Do you have any role or responsibility in sharing best practices from first nation to first nation within the policing programs that might be administered there?

Chief John W. Syrette: We offer Treaty Three up as a best practice. They are doing some wonderful work. The position that they have is funded outside of the FNPP. It was through a grant, the 1,000 officer program out of the Province of Ontario, that is funding that particular position. Up until a very short time ago, the expectation of the FNPP was that we provided front-line policing only. Any other specialty units normally are found in a lot of larger services. We're not funded. It's been a very gradual transition for an acceptance of the creation of these specialty units. It's been a struggle. My police service also has a violence coordinator. We didn't want to put too many examples in, but there are examples of that going on. Through the sharing of resources and information, and doing presentations for other police services, the hope is that we'll create a wave of enthusiasm that will spread throughout the first nations services. Each one does their own to the best of their ability and to the best of the funding that they have available.

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll move over to Ms. Mathyssen and Mr. Saganash. I believe they are going to share five minutes.

Ms. Irene Mathyssen: Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

I'm very pleased that we have this extra five minutes with you, Chief Domm and Chief Syrette.

What you would see as ideal? As an association, what would be your number one priority to address violence against women, that is, your big ask?

Chief John W. Syrette: I think funding for each one of our individual services to allow for even one officer dedicated to providing that linkage to our partners. Their priorities would be education, relationship-building, and the development of a long-term plan in consultation with our partners and how it would be addressed. There is no one-size-fits-all; in each individual community it would have to be tailored to the their specific needs. That would be a great first step.

Ms. Irene Mathyssen: Okay.

Chief Domm, are you in agreement?

Chief John Domm: In short, yes, I am in agreement.

I want to talk about safety and security, the sense of it, the feeling of it, and some of the challenges with it. What we need to acknowledge as well in some of our stand-alone first nations police services is that the police are not always there. This is a problem. The communities tell us this constantly. They want more of us in fact. They want to see us. They want us present but we're not there. We're not there because we're not funded to be there. It may be one community—a small community albeit—and two officers may be funded for that community. But two officers only provide so many hours of coverage a week. The reality of this is that there are a lot of gaps. With gaps and a lack of policing presence there is no law. It's a sense of lawlessness. It's a lack of a sense of security and safety. Even if you wanted to report it who are you going to report it to? If you do report it who's going to be there to safeguard you? Who's going to be there to help you? And it's not just for the first few hours or the first day but the next day, and the day after that, and the week after that.

● (1945)

Ms. Irene Mathyssen: Thank you very much.

Mr. Saganash.

Mr. Romeo Saganash: I guess what I was trying to drive at in my previous question was the necessity of having a national awareness program so that more women can report on incidents throughout this country.

Do you see a need for that? Should that be part of our recommendations? And who do you see as partners in achieving this national awareness campaign throughout the country?

Chief John W. Syrette: The First Nations Chiefs of Police service would be, of course, but I believe the AFN would be a great starting point. A lot of our PTOs at the provincial level and the National Women's Association would be a great starting point. There could be funding of something as simple as a toll-free phone number that they could contact and explain what's going on. There could be someone on the other end who would assist them with what to expect when they've made a call to the police—i.e., they'll come to your house, and they'll ask you a lot of difficult questions, but you'll need to be specific.

That type of support would be huge for us. When most of our officers show up, we will do the exact thing that this support line is saying: the officers will ask you a lot of difficult questions, but you'll need to be as forthright as possible and explain it to them.

That is the only way they will be able to effectively address this. Right off the top, I think that would be a good starting point.

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Truppe.

Mrs. Susan Truppe (London North Centre, CPC): Thank you, Madam Chair.

I will split my time with my colleague Mr. Dechert.

Thank you both for coming. Certainly our government takes violence against women and girls very seriously. We've done a lot for women and girls in Canada, more than any other government. We're certainly glad you're here and we're glad to have this committee to see what we can do to help the women and girls out there.

The member opposite suggested that we don't want to give the same rights as other Canadians have, yet when we voted on Bill S-2, both the NDP and the Liberals didn't vote on that and support us. That was giving women and girls, and men, the same matrimonial rights that we have across Canada.

You said something when you were speaking that I'm not sure I heard right. Did you say that it's 30 times that a woman is abused before she picks up the phone? Did you say 30?

Chief John W. Syrette: That figure was an estimate accepted a number of years ago in a committee I was involved in, Justice Partners Serving Victims in Ontario. They guesstimated that it was a conservative estimate that there were 30 incidents of violence before a woman mustered up the courage to make that phone call to police.

Mrs. Susan Truppe: That's very high. I thought maybe it was three; thirty is tragic. That is horrible.

Did I read somewhere that you were involved in Walk a Mile in Her Shoes? Are you involved in that across your communities?

Chief John W. Syrette: We have Walk a Mile in Her Shoes in Kettle Point, which is one of my communities.

Mrs. Susan Truppe: Okay. I knew I read that somewhere.

I know that at Status of Women Canada we try to engage men and boys in that. We have the BC Lions out west who are trying to engage men and boys in order to raise awareness about violence against women and girls.

To either one of you, how do your organizations work to educate men and boys in your community?

Chief John Domm: There's a program called I Am a Kind Man that I've seen in a number of communities across the province of Ontario. It really goes towards educating, raising awareness, and emphasizing, supporting, and validating positive behaviours and actions.

To my knowledge, we've had it in Rama, and I've seen it in other communities across Ontario. I'm not sure if it's national or not.

● (1950)

Mrs. Susan Truppe: Thank you very much.

I'll pass it over to my colleague.

Mr. Bob Dechert (Mississauga—Erindale, CPC): Thank you.

Thanks, gentlemen. I'll speak quickly because we're running short of time.

What percentage of missing persons cases on reserves are resolved? Do you have any concept of that?

Chief John W. Syrette: No, sorry.

Mr. Bob Dechert: Do you have any idea of how it would compare with the general population, or if it's changing over time?

Chief John W. Syrette: I don't have any evidence for that, sorry.

Mr. Bob Dechert: All right.

Our government has been consulting with victims across Canada. Obviously, there are women on reserves across Canada who are victims. Their families are also victims. Often what victims tell us when we have these consultations is that the police don't give them enough information about what's happening with their case. Whatever the offence is that's been committed against them, they give a statement to the police, then the police take control of it and don't keep people informed about what they are doing to investigate. They might tell them that the person has been charged and then they don't hear anything more until trial. They might be called as a witness. Maybe there is just one witness, and then they don't hear anything more about the whole trial process.

What types of procedures do your first nations police organizations use to keep the families of the victims involved? If it's a missing person case or a case of violence against women, how do you follow up with them and how do you keep them involved in the process?

Chief John Domm: I don't think we're inconsistent with any other police service in Ontario, quite frankly. I follow the provincial legislation and regulations, the adequacy standards in that respect.

One of the challenges with keeping families well informed, or as informed as they may want to be, is that you never quite know why one candidate is missing or being reported as missing. Sometimes missing people are actually fleeing from their abusers, so we need to be very cautious of all the possibilities that surround these cases—

Mr. Bob Dechert: I'm sorry to interrupt. What if it's a case of violence against women and they know who the perpetrator is? How do you work with the victims and keep them involved in the process? Do you think there is a need to do that? Have any victims or their families expressed that to you?

Chief John Domm: Absolutely. Certainly when a charge is laid they are informed. If the individual, the assailant, is held for bail hearing, they are informed. If the accused is released from jail, there are systems and processes in place to inform the victims of crime and advise them of the conditions with the assailant and the terms, and then they are coached. In some cases, we may even do safety plans with that victim to ensure she is well aware of what to look for, what to be cautious of, what to do if there are any breaches or potential breaches by her assailant.

The scale is quite large in terms of the range of activities you may undertake with that particular victim, but we definitely try to work very closely with our victims of crime to try to keep them well informed at all stages of the process.

Mr. Bob Dechert: Has the process been improving in recent years?

The Chair: A very short answer, please.

Chief John Domm: There is a lot of good work going on in partnership with the courts and the police to aid and support victims of crime.

The Chair: Thank you so much.

Our one hour is done, regrettably, and we'd like to say thank you to Chief Domm and Chief Syrette for spending your Thursday evening with us and enlightening us as to the work you do for this very important issue.

Thank you to all of our committee members for your participation, and to our observers.

I declare the meeting adjourned.