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Chair

Mrs. Stella Ambler

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● (1805)

[*English*]

The Chair (Mrs. Stella Ambler (Mississauga South, CPC)): Welcome to all, and good evening.

I'd like to officially open meeting number three of the Special Committee on Violence Against Indigenous Women by asking for a minute of silence to honour the victims. We are coming up tomorrow on the anniversary of the École Polytechnique tragedy, so a minute of silence to honour the victims of violence against women would be in order. We'll do that now.

[*A moment of silence observed*]

Thank you.

To begin with, I'd like to welcome our witnesses today. From the Ontario Provincial Police, we have Susanne Decock, superintendent, aboriginal policing bureau; and from the National Aboriginal Circle Against Family Violence, we have Dr. Anita Olsen Harper and Carole Brazeau.

We're going to start with Superintendent Decock.

Welcome.

Supt Susanne Decock (Superintendent, Aboriginal Policing Bureau, Ontario Provincial Police): Thank you very much.

Good evening everyone.

It's certainly my pleasure to be here. I appreciate the opportunity to contribute to this important discussion and to provide information from the Ontario Provincial Police, in particular the aboriginal policing bureau, and our work to address the critical issue that is the work of your committee.

My appearance here today reflects a strong personal and professional commitment to working to understand and respond to violence being experienced by women, and working with our youth —girls and boys—to break destructive cycles and encourage lifestyle choices that are healthy and responsible.

I've been a police officer for more than 20 years, and I currently serve as a commander of the aboriginal policing bureau of the OPP. As well, I am a very proud member of the Alderville First Nation.

Let me begin with a few comments on the policing landscape in Ontario. In Ontario policing responsibilities are delivered by a variety of services. The OPP, 53 municipal police services, and nine self-directed first nation police services share the responsibilities within the province. The OPP primarily polices smaller urban and rural areas, as well as highways, waterways, trails, and many isolated parts of the province.

I understand you've spoken with representatives of the First Nations Chiefs of Police Association. In Ontario, the nine self-directed first nation police services police some 94 reserve communities, many of them very remote locations. As well, the OPP directly polices 21 first nation communities and administers policing for another 20 communities under the Ontario First Nations Policing Agreement.

The Aboriginal policing bureau was established in 2007 to focus on the OPP's first nation policing responsibilities and to advocate across the organization on behalf of aboriginal communities and peoples. Our overall role is to ensure the OPP develops and sustains the ability to appropriately respond to aboriginal issues in the province.

Internally, our focus is building organizational cultural competency. A better, broader understanding of aboriginal issues is essential to providing appropriate policing and meaningful community supports.

Externally, our focus is relationship-building, and advocacy and support for community wellness, safety, and security. Here, youth programming and community wellness initiatives are a particularly important part of our bureau's work as a way to support community partners, and particularly young people who may be at risk. I'm very proud of this work that our unit is doing, and I'd like to come back to that in a moment.

In terms of OPP front-line assistance and prevention, the issues that you asked me to focus on this evening, there are several things I'd like to highlight, including front-line education; training and supports to improve prevention and investigative work; crime prevention; working with community partners in supporting community and public awareness and prevention activities; ongoing analysis of cases of missing and murdered aboriginal women; and aboriginal youth programming.

Our organization really has made quite a shift, a very large organizational commitment, if you will, to the education piece. Our native-awareness training unit is the foundational piece of this OPP training. It helps broaden awareness, knowledge, and understanding of the issues as they pertain to the work the OPP does. This training is provided by the unit within my section in a variety of formats. There are 18 five-day off-site sessions per year for approximately 500 officers. There is recruit training. Every OPP recruit spends time with our native-awareness trainers. They receive almost two days in total in training, as well as the piece that they get at the Ontario Police College.

We also provide an annual lunch-and-learn series at our headquarters. We do about five to six sessions per year for roughly 100 staff members, which is very important, because we're also reaching our civilian employees, who are a very big part of our organization.

Domestic violence investigators' training includes an aboriginal cultural component and dynamic, and really focuses on the issues specific to many first nation communities and women. The OPP has some abuse and domestic violence coordinators. These are the more on-the-ground types assigned to detachments throughout the province. We have approximately 100, and they are very key in terms of both the front-line investigations and prevention. They provide the ongoing training and support for the front-line officers doing investigations. They collaborate with a lot of local community partners, provide education, and focus on ways to improve how our officers are responding to incidents.

● (1810)

The OPP has an ongoing focus on the analysis of case files of missing and murdered aboriginal women, which began with the concerns raised by the Native Women's Association of Canada's findings. We're looking to understand the situation within OPP jurisdiction and, to the degree possible, in Ontario. We're engaged in ongoing discussions with our policing partners provincially and nationally to compile information of interests, of analysis, coordination, and information-sharing.

Turning to our focus on youth, I'd like to start by saying how impactful this work is and how proud I am of some of the programs we're delivering, because I really see the youth as a priority. Our native awareness section of our bureau deals with delivering this programming. The youth programming and community wellness initiatives are important elements in how we support the communities, and particularly the young people who may be at risk. Many of our initiatives deal with identity and helping young people understand and reconnect with their roots. They help them find and build self-worth, self-esteem, and pride in who they are, and develop respect and healthy relationships—all essential building blocks, of course, for healthy development. It's very important that I point out that any of these initiatives and programs we deliver, we do in partnership with the first nation communities, often with the local first nation police services, other policing partners, and community groups as well.

I'll give you a quick example of some of the programs we deliver. Walking the Path really is a program that has become the foundation for most of our youth programming. It's a 10-week program designed for kindergarten to grade 12 in schools and through community venues. It's delivered directly to youth and through facilitator training as well.

Niigan Mosewak is a culturally relevant youth intervention program. It's a week-long summer camp experience for vulnerable youth. It includes a leadership component for continued development of youth mentors. That's an important piece, of course.

We deliver the Medicine Wheel youth initiative in Pikangikum, where we work with the Pikangikum members in northern Ontario. You probably know that this is a community that faces many systemic challenges, including high rates of substance abuse and youth suicide. We've been doing some ongoing monthly work there for close to a couple of years, and we've made some great partnerships with community members and elders, as well as the local school.

Continuity and sustainability, of course, are key to success in any of these initiatives. As I said, these are all built on partnerships with the local community and schools, and elders as well.

That's a little bit about the aboriginal policing bureau, and I've mentioned some of the other programs we're doing within the OPP around the investigations piece, but I'm very happy to provide you with this brief overview.

The Chair: Thank you very much; we appreciate it.

I believe you'd like to use your 10 minutes, Dr. Olsen Harper, and then Ms. Brazeau will help you with questions.

You have 10 minutes. You can use it—

Ms. Carole Brazeau (National Project Coordinator, National Aboriginal Circle Against Family Violence): We'll be sharing.

The Chair: Oh, you'll do it together. Okay, wonderful. Thank you.

Please go ahead.

Ms. Carole Brazeau: *Mani nindjinicoz. Kitigan Zibi nin donjiba*.

Good evening.

My name is Carole Brazeau. I'm representing the National Aboriginal Circle Against Family Violence. The acronym is NACAFV. Our primary mission is to end violence in our aboriginal communities.

The NACAFV also provides training to the dedicated front-line professionals in on-reserve AANDC-funded shelters primarily, and transition houses across Canada. In response to violence against first nations women, NACAFV president Sheila Swasson stated the following nearly a decade ago, and it is still true to this day:

> NACAFV is well aware of the enormity of the issue; our front-line workers, the women in the trenches, are usually the first ones in contact with the women and children who have been exposed to some of the most extreme cases of violence.

As well, the NACAFV pointed out that the inequities of funding to first nations shelters is a contributing factor causing the disparities in the quality of and access to services in our country amongst first nations women and children who require these services. Today, the NACAFV is calling on the federal government of Canada to support a prevailing request for a national strategy to address the issues of violence against Indigenous women. This must be in tandem with addressing the inequities in funding programs and services for first nations women and children who need to access shelters for their own safety.

The NACAFV is willing to collaborate with all levels of government and other organizations for finding effective strategies and solutions to end violence against first nations women and children. Women's shelters can take a leading role in coordinating, designing, and planning educational and training offerings.

This year, in February of 2013, at our annual training forum, I asked the front-line workers to provide ideas on how to prevent family violence and domestic homicides, and their answers were mainly about education and prevention.

This is where Dr. Olsen Harper's expertise comes in.

● (1815)

Dr. Anita Olsen Harper (Consultant, National Aboriginal Circle Against Family Violence): Thank you. *Meegwetch*.

My name is Anita Olsen Harper. I'm Anishinabe from the Lac Seul First Nation in northwestern Ontario.

Our opening statement on addressing the issues of front-line assistance and violence prevention proposes the following proactive thoughts. These are split into two broad categories: education and prevention.

Education needs to be offered to children, youth, women and men, and parents. The goal of this type of education is to break the cycles of violence in the home and the community. The study of how western-based gender roles made inroads into first nations life is important for youth to learn. It is never too early to start learning this history: start in kindergarten and don't finish until the last grade.

Gender history can help native youth recognize and unlearn harmful male-female expectations and stereotypes. It helps reverse the production of gender that makes male privilege and female submission appear natural, rather than it being deliberately created and specifically nurtured.

As well, this type of teaching helps students understand the matriarchal systems by which many first nations were governed in times past. A community-based, school-based approach to education can involve the entire community, and particularly target young parents on how to be involved in their children's anti-violence education. Parents must also be taught by example, and themselves teach by example. This is an intergenerational approach to teaching.

The deterioration of healthy relationships between men and women and boys and girls is largely rooted in eurocentric gender values and placements. In older first nations societies, men and women had different but complementary gender roles and responsibilities. These were based on respect and honour. Children and youth were educated to fulfill their places and responsibilities toward peaceful living in society.

Youth involvement is vital to anti-violence learning and being accountable for one's own activities. It takes only one person to produce a violent household. Consequently, unlike most contemporary first nations populations, social problems were held in check by specific protocols and ways of doing that left youth free to fulfill their individual human potentials as active, contributing tribal members.

The accomplishment of gender is perpetuated by cultural beliefs about underlying and essential differences between women and men and the establishing of social structures that support these beliefs. It is indeed very important to teach about gender violence in schools. One academic stated that "My research over the past two decades on peer-to-peer sexual harassment has confirmed that schools may well be the training grounds for domestic violence through the practice of and permission for sexual harassment".

While such insights may be too intense for very young children, they can still be involved in identifying the gender prescriptions in media, with which they are undoubtedly already very familiar.

Foundational curricula can be established to explore various western-based expressions that ground the inferiority and subjugation of women in cultural norms. Students can be taught how to detect these normative portrayals. The values, ideals, and suggestive prods that emerge from popular gendered representations that are meant for children and youth should be seriously examined and questioned. Skilled instructors can teach parents how to initiate and further students' discourse and lead to the realization that such idealized and patterned gender arrangements can readily enable bullying and violence against women and girls.

Teaching first nations-specific gender discrimination could include a study of the legal categorizations of an "Indian" as defined by the Indian Act. Creative and imaginative teachers can help youth, male and female, locate themselves within federal legislation. They can develop curriculum that is interesting and involves students personally through a study of their placement within the Indian registry. Knowing one's identity strengthens individuals and helps them seek proper ways of non-violent self-expression.

● (1820)

From a broader perspective, such discussion can help students realize the violence of the Indian Act, and also the resilience of the first nations in withstanding the extermination efforts that are embedded therein. Specifically, Bill C-31 is a worthy area of study, including the history of its development by women who were actively opposed by governments and national native organizations because of internalized sexist discrimination against them.

Schools, communities, and parental protocols must complement one another so that maximum effectiveness of anti-gender bullying, anti-harassment, and anti-violence policies is achieved. There is evidence that sexist behaviours and attitudes are so much a part of the ethos of schools that they actually go unnoticed; they have become normalized.

Number two, prevention programs are needed. More parenting programs that help all parents with violence-free households are needed. There must be strict laws on abuse. The community must take a stand. Leadership must be an example and advocate for violence-free living. Leaders need to be healthy and violence-free themselves in order to support the families in their communities.

More male-based programs for boys, youth, and men are needed. Teach how to create safe spaces for genders to develop, starting in the classroom. Have a full week on a family violence prevention campaign, for example.

Prevention programs must include actual hands-on activities that include real-life case studies. They must involve workshops with elders, community leaders, and experts in the areas of health, justice, and sports. For example, teach how domestic violence negatively impacts on sports involvement.

The whole community must offer support for everyone else in the community: for the victims, for perpetrators, for youth, for elders, and for shelter staff. As appropriate, circles for discussion should be used among groups of women, women and men, and for families. Gatherings specifically for women on specific topics would work also. This format should be extended to men.

Community members who may not have a special community leadership profile, such as youth and elders—grassroots people—need opportunities for empowerment. Everyone needs opportunities to find and express their own voices for their own wants and needs in their own lives. An array of healing and teaching techniques would be needed for this, conducted by competent facilitators.

People need to go back to their own cultural teachings and stories, especially of their origins of creation. They need to know their own traditions and have strong, resilient foundations to protect them from the bad things that will for sure happen in their lives.

Prevention includes awareness-raising activities and being cognizant of public safety.

Finally, prevention work must always address systemic oppression, since it is the foundation of internal oppression. Oppression breeds violence: violence against the most vulnerable, who are the women and the children of aboriginal communities.

Meegwetch.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

You have given us two wonderful presentations and a lot to chew on, so we'll move right into questions, beginning with Ms. Mathyssen.

Ms. Irene Mathyssen (London—Fanshawe, NDP): Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

Thank you so much for being here and sharing your expertise with us. We're very grateful.

I have a couple of questions. I am going to share my time with Ms. Ashton, so I'll try to be succinct.

Here's the first thing I wondered about. Three years ago, the Standing Committee on the Status of Women undertook a consultation across the country with first nations communities and with organizations that helped women, that dealt with women. One of the things we heard all too often was that there was a lack of trust among these women in police services. They felt very often that they weren't dealt with properly or fairly. In some cases, they were incarcerated. Their children were taken away.

My question is, how do you create that trust? How do you go about establishing a positive relationship in that regard? Is it a national awareness campaign? Is it education for police services? How do we do that?

That's for whoever would like to answer.

● (1825)

The Chair: Is that for both sets of witnesses?

Ms. Irene Mathyssen: Yes.

Supt Susanne Decock: Thank you. I'd be happy to answer that.

It's a very good question, of course, and one that we've certainly all asked ourselves many times.

Some of the education that I spoke about that we're doing with our officers really has shown our commitment as an organization to take a step toward this.

There is a lot of long-standing history between police services across Canada and the first nation communities. Of course, not all that history is positive. As I mentioned, in our case, in the OPP, we saw a real organizational shift and commitment to educating the officers. We need to give them the tools they need to go out and police the communities, and, in your words, it's all about trust.

One of the other sections that our bureau has is a provincial liaison team. These are front-line officers who are specially trained in communication and conflict resolution skills. They're deployed around the province when we have a critical incident going on. They spend an awful lot of time investing in the communities, getting to know the community members. We talk about that a lot, about the investment you can get by just getting to know your community. Those relationships often payoff in times of strife and conflict.

Ms. Irene Mathyssen: Thank you.

Madam Brazeau and Dr. Harper, have you anything to add?

Ms. Carole Brazeau: Yes. I feel that it's important.

The role of the police is to serve and protect, I believe. When women do call in cases of family violence, it is important that the police intervene. It is a criminal act. We did have reports from shelter directors that in certain communities the police were not intervening. It would be important for them to intervene.

Regarding trust, of course, it's justified. In my capacity as a justice and public security coordinator previously, when I was working with the Quebec native women we did give workshops to the police who were in training on how to intervene with first nations women and children, victims of family violence or victims of violence, and after the training they received from us they felt more comfortable to intervene in these cases.

So I believe that if they do have some training from an indigenous organization, it could be beneficial.

The Chair: You have just under two more minutes. I'm not sure when you're switching over.

Ms. Irene Mathyssen: Perhaps I should allow Ms. Ashton to take over.

Ms. Niki Ashton (Churchill, NDP): Perhaps I can direct the question to Dr. Harper—and Ms. Brazeau, if you like, you can add to it.

Dr. Harper, building on the discussion and your presentation, I want to thank you very much for these presentations. I also want to acknowledge very much the analysis you brought forward. Unfortunately this committee is very rushed in dealing with such a serious issue, and your analysis is unique and very important for what we are doing here.

I've put forward a motion calling for a national action plan to end violence against women. Canada is alone amongst like-minded countries in not having a national action plan. Our motion suggests that there are guidelines and there needs to be a main focus on indigenous women and violence against indigenous women.

I'm wondering if you believe that we need a national action plan that involves reaction, prevention, and all of these things with respect to indigenous women, and all women as well.

● (1830)

Dr. Anita Olsen Harper: Thank you for that.

Yes, I certainly do see a need for a national action plan, a national strategy, something that is proactive and that acknowledges the history. The previous question was about mistrust. It's not just a surface mistrust, it's deep-seated, it's historical. Those things have to be addressed, and a national action plan has to acknowledge that. It has to acknowledge what the prevailing Canadian sentiments are toward aboriginal people, and specifically toward aboriginal women and children. It is very much a necessity.

Thank you, Niki. *Meegwetch*.

The Chair: Thank you.

Over to you, Ms. Truppe, for seven minutes.

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

Welcome, and thank you for being here.

Susanne, I think you mentioned something when you were speaking about partnerships, and I just want to assure everyone that certainly our government does take the issue of violence against aboriginal women very seriously, and does continue to work in partnerships with provincial governments, territorial governments, aboriginal people, and other stakeholders, in order to develop effective and appropriate solutions. We work quite a bit with partnerships.

I'm also parliamentary secretary for the status of women, so I know we've also funded some great projects that address the needs of aboriginal women and girls. For example, in B.C. I think it was around $186,000. That was a 24-month project that responds to the specific needs of aboriginal women who have experienced abuse, as they transition to violence-free lives. In the Yukon, it was about $265,000 for a 36-month project that assisted aboriginal women to transition to violence-free lives. We also committed funding of over $24 million for two years for the family violence prevention program. That allows the programming to be offered at an annual funding level of over $30.4 million.

I would like to ask maybe Carole or Anita if you could speak to the importance of this funding and how your organization has benefited from it.

Ms. Carole Brazeau: Certainly. Our core funding at the NACAFV is $250,000 per year. We do receive $125,000 for our annual training forum and our annual general assembly, as well as training for shelter directors and transition houses annually.

Mrs. Susan Truppe: How has that helped? That's the funding you got for different areas, but how does that benefit the women?

Ms. Carole Brazeau: Mainly we initiate, design, and deliver culturally appropriate programs and services, and training for front-line shelter and transition house workers, and we've also produced some publications. Dr. Olsen Harper authored one of them. That one is called "Addressing Funding Policy Issues: INAC-Funded Women's Shelters". That can be found on our website, and that goes into details regarding funding.

Mrs. Susan Truppe: Great, thank you.

Maybe you could just talk about a few of the programs your organization runs to combat violence against women, and which ones you think have the highest success rate. Do you have one that works better over another one, perhaps?

Dr. Anita Olsen Harper: I would just like to point out that the membership of the National Aboriginal Circle Against Family Violence is mostly the on-reserve women's shelters, so we ourselves only offer programs from the funding for the annual general assembly. We don't run shelters. The shelters are run by the executive directors. We're a national association of the on-reserve women's shelters. We're sort of the coordinating body of educational endeavours.

● (1835)

Mrs. Susan Truppe: Thank you.

At Status of Women Canada, one of the goals is to engage men and boys in making women's safety a priority and shared responsibility. One of my favourite initiatives that we've done is "Be More than a Bystander", and I think—correct me of I'm wrong—you have a forum coming up next week.

Ms. Carole Brazeau: Yes.

Mrs. Susan Truppe: It focuses on honouring men in the National Aboriginal Circle Against Family Violence, which I think is great. You were looking for aboriginal male role models for 2013 and 2014. Can you tell me the importance of focusing your efforts on reaching out to aboriginal men, which would be including them with the issues facing the women?

Ms. Carole Brazeau: Yes, well the conference concept this year is regarding supporting men's initiatives for non-violence that raise awareness in the aboriginal communities. So the Nishiiyuu men who walked from Mistissini to Chisasibi will be there as well. It's just leading by example, which is mainly the approach we are taking.

Mrs. Susan Truppe: How will you work towards educating and engaging the men and boys so you can promote the safety of women in your communities?

Dr. Anita Olsen Harper: This forum that's happening next week is actually the first of its kind NACAFV has been involved with that is specifically geared towards men and boys. Usually, our efforts have been towards the front-line staff and the executive directors of the on-reserve women's shelters. I really do hope it's a part of something that's going to be fairly regular, because when we address women's issues only from the women's point of view, we are not looking at the other half of the picture, the men and the boys.

Mrs. Susan Truppe: Thank you. Agreed.

At this conference, then, I know what you hope to gain, but how do you anticipate you're going to go about it? How will you engage those men who are there so that they take something back to their communities or perhaps to some young boys?

Ms. Carole Brazeau: It will be all men who are going to lead this conference, so that's also part of the concept. We're there to support any of their initiatives and any of the leads they're taking. We are encouraging that.

Mrs. Susan Truppe: Thank you. I look forward to seeing that.

Thank you, Chair.

The Chair: We'll go over to you, Ms. Bennett.

Hon. Carolyn Bennett (St. Paul's, Lib.): Thank you again.

One of the things we heard from others and from government officials is that the data isn't as good as it should be. We heard that maybe in New Zealand they have a better way of tracking what we're dealing with.

For all of you, I guess, obviously the murder clearance rate seems to be worrying, but do you have data as to the deaths due to intimate partners versus strangers or versus the sex trade? How do we solve this, I think, unless we know what we're dealing with?

Do we have a geographic approach in terms of needs-based funding? How do you know if these programs are working? Do you get to see the incidence of violence decrease if it's an effective program? Surely, too, we occasionally try things that don't work. Are we sharing the ones that aren't working such that we can actually really make sure that what we fund is effective?

I'll just throw these out for you.

I didn't realize that you're mainly dealing with first nations at the circle, because we've heard very clearly from Pauktuutit and the Métis that there needs to be a distinctions-based approach if you're going to deal with secure personal cultural identity and some of the things that we know actually work.

My third question that all of you can answer in whatever way you want is on, I think, the lack of cooperation between police forces, which is certainly the perception of the families we've talked to. Some even have called for not only a national action plan but a task force, from the RCMP to provincial policing to aboriginal policing. How do we show that people are talking amongst themselves and that these investigations really are taking place in a real way?

I think that when at the October 3 round table we did with families a stepfather says that he should have been the suspect and no one even questioned him, people don't feel that this is being taken seriously, and they feel that for some of these missing and murdered women, it's just somehow written off as inevitable, which is where I think we're seeing the lack of trust.

Answer whichever bits you want to.

Superintendent, maybe you want to?

● (1840)

Supt Susanne Decock: Sure. Thank you. I'd be happy to start.

I'll speak to the evaluation piece you mentioned first, the piece about the programming. That for sure has been a challenge and a struggle. We can say that we think it works, or that we're doing a great job, but how do we really know for sure? In particular, the training that we deliver at the aboriginal policing bureau for our provincial liaison team officers and, more importantly, perhaps, the youth programming that we deliver, is something we've been working on in—

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: Do you measure incidents in the school and then watch them go down? How do you measure what's going on?

Supt Susanne Decock: The evaluation I'm speaking of is around the program we're delivering for youth in the communities. We're looking at partnering on third-party evaluations, if you will, so it is not we who are measuring our programs. We've had some discussions with first nations community leaders. We're reaching out to some local universities.

To be honest, trying to nail down that third-party evaluation piece has been a struggle, but that is an ongoing—

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: A lot of us think we have to move from evaluation to applied research, and the applied research usually does require some sort of post-secondary lending of graduate students to community-based organizations to find out what's working and what's not working. Just evaluating how everybody felt about it I don't think is going to work.

Supt Susanne Decock: That's a good point, for sure. Recently we've been having some discussions with a graduate student from York University. She's doing some work on aboriginal critical incidents, the police response in particular. She's working on that nationally and we've participated in that and we're happy to do so and, yes, we're looking at partnering with some universities, looking at our numbers around youth programming. That's hard to measure, for sure.

Dr. Anita Olsen Harper: I think your question on evaluation is a very valid one. I've done a few evaluations but I've found, almost without exception, that the people whom one is never required to ask or consult are the people who receive the programs, which to me is glaring.

It's very difficult to do research within native communities. The risk is very high in this area. Passing through any sort of ethics protocol is lengthy and consent from the chief and council or the health authority is very problematic.

I agree that more work has to be done in that area because I have found evaluation is a really weak area, and as you say, things are probably done over and over again without it being really firm and clear that this is indeed helping people.

When we are asked for reports on whatever we deliver, we're not even sure they're read, let alone how far the recommendations we give might go.

● (1845)

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: In terms of funding for the shelters, we've heard both at this committee and at the hearings on Bill S-2 that there don't seem to be enough shelters, and if there aren't shelters then there is probably not transitional housing. Certainly, hearing that 70% in Nunavut don't have a shelter is worrying.

The Chair: Let's have a quick answer, please.

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: If places are full all the time, how do you find out where you should be investing more in?

The Chair: We have time for a very short answer.

Ms. Carole Brazeau: We know that shelters are there to provide safe spaces for women and children and we believe that they are there to prevent domestic homicides when a woman is in such a situation; therefore, I believe we would require many more shelters than are currently available. The ones that are available are underfunded.

As well, it is important to meet with the families whose loved ones have been murdered or are missing or are victims of domestic homicides, so they know NWAC supports them.

The Chair: To be fair, I'm going to interrupt you to go over to Ms. Brown for her seven minutes.

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

Thank you very much, ladies, for your insight. It's good to hear your testimony.

Superintendent, I am going to start with you, if I may. You identified yourself as a member of a band.

Supt Susanne Decock: Yes.

Ms. Lois Brown: Could you tell us a little about what drew you into policing, why you chose that as a career path? I think it's a calling.

Supt Susanne Decock: I'm from the Alderville First Nation. It's a lovely little community along the shores of Rice Lake, Ontario, just about an hour east of Toronto. Yes, in my case I would say it was a calling. I'm not sure if everyone would feel the same way.

My father is a retired member of the Ontario Provincial Police. He's been retired for 20 years, and he was one of our first first nation officers in the OPP to work for his 30 years. It certainly had a big impact on me growing up. We moved a few times throughout the province, but he spoke an awful lot about his years growing up on the reserve, and lots about family, lots about lessons, and history also.

For sure I would say it was a calling, yes. As a matter of fact, my sister felt the same way, and she's also an officer with the OPP.

Ms. Lois Brown: Well, thank you for your service. I have been a volunteer with the York Regional Police for the last 13 years and have met a tremendous number of officers for whom I believe it's a calling to provide the service that officers do.

You talked a little bit about the training that has been given within the OPP. Could you tell us how many of the officers have been given the training to work on reserves or in our aboriginal communities? Is it by choice that people take that training, or is it part of the training that is generally given in the OPP?

Supt Susanne Decock: Thank you. It's a great question.

I'll start by saying that a great amount of our training is mandatory. After the Ipperwash inquiry we took a really hard look at our training. The creation of the bureau happened after that, and we nailed down some concrete steps to help us move forward. I can say that the week-long course, in particular, is mandatory for our speciality units. Again, it goes back to the organizational commitment. For example, that would include be our tactical team, our search and rescue teams, our trainers, our intelligence officers. As well there's a focus on any detachment that has a first nation population within it or nearby. So that has been mandatory.

As well, the time we have with the recruits has been invaluable. We see them when they first arrive at the police academy. We also see them at the Ontario Police College, which means we're seeing every recruit in Ontario in that case. And then when our OPP recruits come back to the academy, we have them again for a time.

This training encompasses some history in first nation policing in Ontario, culture, and current issues, because while it's very important that we talk about the culture and the history piece—residential schools, of course—the officers will want to talk about what they see in the news, and about the current issues. So we have a piece on that.

We're constantly evaluating the training. We work closely with the provincial police academy to nail down our teaching points and objectives. We also consult constantly with our first nation officers and communities to keep offering the best product we can.

I talked about the lunch-and-learn series. It's really a bit of a capacity issue for us, because the demands are great. It's unfortunate that I don't have the numbers handy, but I know that even in that week-long off-site native awareness course that I talked about, we're putting through about 500 officers a year. We also open it up to first nation police services, municipal guests, other ministry partners, and local community agencies. If they would like to come and we're able to accommodate, we're happy to do that, especially any of our first nation leaders we work with. Because going back to that evaluation piece, of course, we welcome their input and feedback.

● (1850)

Ms. Lois Brown: What is the response of the aboriginal communities when the OPP are called if there is an incident? Maybe you could work into that a response to whether there is an increase or decrease in the number of incidents to which the OPP is called.

You are working, as you said, with the aboriginal policing units as well. We had them here last week. Could you talk a little bit about that piece?

Supt Susanne Decock: The relationship differs, of course, everywhere. I would like to say that for the most part we've really made some strong, positive steps over the years. A lot of it, I believe, goes back to the investment we made in getting to know our communities, and investing in our community youth as well. But the relationship is varied.

I would like to say that for the most part it is positive. We work very closely with our first nation policing partners. You heard me talk about the provincial liaison team program, which is a fairly new program. It's all about giving our officers the tools required, the communication skills and alternative dispute resolution skills. We talk a lot about diversity and the diversity within first nations communities, of course, right? Sometimes we forget about that, that every community is so very different.

A lot of what makes it easier for us is the local detachment commander, the on-the-ground, front-line folks. The relationship they've built over the years with the local community will make it a lot easier in times of crisis.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We'll go over to you, Ms. Ashton, for five minutes.

Ms. Niki Ashton: Thank you very much.

If there is time, based on the answers, my colleague Ms. Mathyssen will also ask a question.

I want to go to the issue of women's shelters, Ms. Brazeau and Dr. Olsen Harper. I would like to hear from you on this.

We know, actually based on a 2012 study, that the rate of spousal violence against aboriginal women is at least two times greater than that in the general population. We're talking about serious numbers. We're talking about women who need help.

I'm wondering if you have any figures or any information on the current situation with respect to funding of women's shelters on reserve, and if you have any information on the demand for shelters or safe houses to be created on first nations across Canada. Fundamentally, do indigenous women across Canada, those who live on reserve, have access to services the way they need them?

● (1855)

Dr. Anita Olsen Harper: As far as the rate of domestic violence in aboriginal communities is concerned, those figures are very hard to find. You said they were two times the rate of other Canadian communities, but I think that's a very conservative figure. In Nunavut, for example, isn't it nine times more? It's just appalling how high those figures are.

There are only 44 or 45 on-reserve women's shelters, and there are 633 first nations in Canada. I really would like to say that the need for shelters is going down, but unfortunately because of some of these things we spoke about earlier, such as historical causes, the culture of male domination and economic dependency—which is the number one reason women stay in abusive relationships—I really don't see that it's getting any better. But this doesn't mean we shouldn't keep increasing our help toward women and children. These are the generations that are coming up.

I really believe in an educational approach. The people who work in shelters are perfectly positioned to be providing that type of education. The only thing is that they're seriously underfunded. In some places they are funded half of what mainstream or provincially funded women's shelters are. That's a serious problem.

Have I answered that, Niki?

Ms. Niki Ashton: Yes. Thank you.

Dr. Anita Olsen Harper: *Meegwetch*. Thank you.

Ms. Irene Mathyssen: My question is in regard to our report. We're going to be writing a report.

What is the most important recommendation we can bring forward to the Government of Canada?

Dr. Anita Olsen Harper: I would like to say that it is having a national strategy or a national action plan to prevent violence against aboriginal women and girls.

Ms. Irene Mathyssen: Thank you.

Are there other thoughts about the recommendations we should be putting forward in terms of our report? Would enhanced funding also be important?

Dr. Anita Olsen Harper: Definitely.

Ms. Irene Mathyssen: Are there any other thoughts?

Superintendent.

Supt Susanne Decock: Thank you.

I would like to add that if a national action plan were the direction, the OPP would support it. I believe we would see those partnerships and that collaboration come together, something like that. Quite often, there are many well-meaning agencies and partners at the table or in the same community and doing the same work. A plan like that might assist with that collaboration.

Ms. Irene Mathyssen: You mean to create some coordination so there is something more effective than what there might otherwise be?

Supt Susanne Decock: Yes.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

For our last five minutes we'll go to Mr. Dechert.

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

Thank you, witnesses, for sharing your expertise with us this evening.

Superintendent Decock, I want to let you know I'm familiar with the Alderville First Nation. My family had a cottage on Rice Lake for many years and I spent many happy times there in the community, shopping in the general store there and using the other services in the community. I was always very impressed by the cenotaph there to soldiers who served in the First and Second World Wars from that community. It's a real tribute to that community.

I wonder if you are aware of the National Centre for Missing Persons and Unidentified Remains. It was established by the RCMP. Does the OPP liaise with that organization?

Supt Susanne Decock: Yes, we do. We have a missing persons section and an unidentified body section in our investigations command, and they work very closely with them.

● (1900)

Mr. Bob Dechert: I understand they have created a manual on best practices for investigating missing persons cases and they share that with police forces across Canada?

Supt Susanne Decock: You mean the RCMP?

Mr. Bob Dechert: Yes, the RCMP, the National Centre for Missing Persons and Unidentified Remains.

Supt Susanne Decock: I believe so. While I would hate to speak for the RCMP, I would say yes.

Mr. Bob Dechert: Okay. I understand they also have a national registry of missing persons, which is available to all police officers through CPIC.

Supt Susanne Decock: Yes.

Mr. Bob Dechert: Okay.

Last week we met with two gentlemen who were representing first nations police organizations. Each of them was chief of his first nation. One of the them was the chief of police from the Rama First Nation near Orillia, Ontario.

I asked him if he knew the percentage of the resolution of missing aboriginal persons cases and whether or not it differed from that of the mainstream population. Do you know those numbers?

Supt Susanne Decock: I have some numbers from our organization, which I would be happy to share, in regard to missing and murdered aboriginal women. They are based on work we've done internally as an organization.

Mr. Bob Dechert: Was that through the OPP?

Supt Susanne Decock: Yes.

Mr. Bob Dechert: Would you say there's a difference in the resolution of these cases for people from reserves versus those off reserve?

Supt Susanne Decock: Unfortunately, I don't have, nor have we done a comparison or looked at the numbers of all missing women. I believe that's what you're suggesting.

Mr. Bob Dechert: Yes. But do you have any sense of whether the resolution of missing persons cases has been getting better or worse over the last few years?

Supt Susanne Decock: Again, just to speak for the OPP, I can tell you that we certainly have made this a priority for us, as I mentioned in my comments, especially since the Native Women's Association of Canada certainly brought it to the forefront a couple of years ago as a big issue for all of our policing agencies to look at.

We have formed an internal working group in our organization with all the partners at the table: the aboriginal policing bureau, our criminal investigations branch, our intelligence branch, the pertinent areas that need to be there. We've started looking at our numbers, and we really looked internally at some of our next steps. We've had those discussions around data collection, collecting by ethnicity, which is something we don't do, so we're certainly having that conversation.

Mr. Bob Dechert: Do you share with first nations police forces your best practices for how you investigate aboriginal cases or missing persons cases?

Supt Susanne Decock: We work very closely with the first nations policing services in Ontario. If there were a homicide, a missing person case, in their community, it would be our Criminal Investigation Branch that would most likely be called in to assist and to work with them.

In terms of the best practices piece, all of our organizations sit together on various committees at the provincial level, so with the Ontario Association of Chiefs of Police, as well as at a national level, so with the Canadian Association of Chiefs of Police. I just happen to be a co-chair of the subcommittee there on policing with first nations, Métis, and Inuit people. We often talk about best practices.

Mr. Bob Dechert: So are you confident then that there's sufficient sharing of best practices across all these various police forces on how missing person and homicide cases are investigated and do you cross-train between the OPP and, say, the first nations forces in Ontario?

Supt Susanne Decock: Any of the training we offer in the OPP is made available to all of our first nation policing partners, yes.

Mr. Bob Dechert: Very good, thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Thank you once again to the three of you. Thank you for lending us your expertise today for an hour. I hope it went by quickly for you and we really do appreciate your coming to Parliament Hill to give us your testimony and for contributing to our report. Thank you so much.

We're just going to suspend for a minute or two while we switch panels and then we'll see everyone back here again.

● _____ (Pause) _____ ●

● (1910)

The Chair: Welcome back to our second hour.

We are very pleased to have with us today, representing the National Association of Friendship Centres, Mr. Jeffrey Cyr, the executive director.

As representatives from the Assembly of First Nations, we have National Chief Shawn Atleo; Regional Chief Cameron Alexis from Alberta; and Ms. Charlene Belleau, former Chief of Alkali Lake, B. C.

Welcome to all of you.

Mr. Cyr, are you comfortable going first with your 10 minutes?

Mr. Jeffrey Cyr (Executive Director, National Association of Friendship Centres): Sure, I'll start.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Jeffrey Cyr: Madam Chair, distinguished members of the Status of Women special committee, thank you for the opportunity to present to you on this very serious issue.

I wish to acknowledge first the traditional lands of the Algonquin nation where we are meeting today.

My name is Jeff Cyr. I'm a Métis from Manitoba and the executive director of the National Association of Friendship Centres.

Just for your knowledge, the National Association of Friendship Centres is a national aboriginal organization comprised of 119 urban-based aboriginal service organizations and seven provincial and territorial associations located form coast to coast to coast in Canada.

We've been providing community-based services on the front line for over 60 years in Canada, and are part of the social fabric of this country. As to the topic of this committee this evening, it's all front-line work, from our perspective.

The work of this special committee is very important to the friendship centre movement. Many of the documented cases of missing and murdered indigenous women in Canada have links to urban areas. Furthermore, these women and girls are members of our communities, so we are compelled to speak out. We are compelled to seek change.

What I really want to speak to you about today is action. I believe we should focus on making demonstrable change on the ground in the lives of aboriginal people on a societal level. This issue of murdered and missing women and violence against women and girls is fundamentally a Canadian problem. It is not an aboriginal problem. It has often been cast as such. These are the most vulnerable elements of our society.

I have long stated that complex issues are not solved in isolation, are not solved by one single actor—not my organization, nor police forces, nor the government can do this alone. It is through shared goals, collective action, and leadership that we can effect change. This is our challenge.

The Native Women's Association of Canada's Sisters In Spirit database shows that of the cases they documented to 2010, 70% disappeared from urban areas, and 60% of those who were murdered were murdered in urban areas. The National Association of Friendship Centres believes this is a broad societal problem, one that requires action on all levels to ensure that indigenous women and girls are safe.

Research into this complex issue has been undertaken by the Native Women's Association of Canada, Manitoba's aboriginal justice inquiry, the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, the Missing Women Commission of Inquiry in British Columbia, and others. The research has revealed the higher vulnerability of aboriginal women and girls to violence.

In 2009, as a response, at our annual general meeting of the National Association of Friendship Centres, the membership passed a resolution and conducted an organization-wide study on poverty and social exclusion. I'll draw the connection for you in a minute.

Some of the findings of the research are that 94% of respondents agreed that social exclusion is an issue with our clients: that's 94%. Of the respondents, 58% say that social exclusion is a major factor in creating poverty. The study identified that the main reasons for the social exclusion of urban aboriginal people include racism, prejudice, stereotyping, poor education and literacy, poverty and unemployment, lack of government policies and programs for urban aboriginal people, and an unwillingness of governments to include urban aboriginal people in their policies.

The key messages from this study that friendship centres want all governments to know are that poverty and social exclusion among the urban aboriginal population in Canada are very serious issues that impact many thousands of children, youth, and single families in their daily lives; and that the impacts of poverty and social exclusion are having devastating impacts on health, social education, economic well-being, and the future lives of Canadian urban aboriginal people. Furthermore, poverty and social exclusion are linked to violence in our communities.

Sadly, indigenous women and girls are among the most vulnerable in Canadian society. For those of us who provide services to them, we know that there are serious systemic barriers and challenges that our communities face. We know that historical trauma, social exclusion, and systemic racism only begin to paint a picture of vulnerable communities and the obstacles they face in achieving safety.

The NAFC has done some work in this area. Our New Journeys website is designed to provide information directly to aboriginal peoples, and particularly to first nations women, who need this information for their transitions from the reserve or remote communities to a city. The website lists thousands of service organizations and agencies. It also contains transitional planning guides for women, students, and families.

● (1915)

However, in order to address these issues, we believe that widespread systemic action and change are needed. We must focus on integrative approaches to collective action. Innovative approaches and widespread systemic action are needed in areas of policing, education, social services, public health, and others to ensure that we provide effective support for our most vulnerable populations.

An example that I find enlightening in providing hope on how we do things within our communities is the hub model that was developed in Prince Albert, Saskatchewan, led by the chief of police there. This is an example of interlinking service providers to decrease crime rates—and there's evidence that it works. Using short-term case-work teams made up of a spectrum of human services personnel is a way of acknowledging that violence and crime prevention is a community responsibility. They have found success in ways that would not have been possible without an integrated approach. It was not about money but about an integrated approach.

Indigenous communities are recognizing the role they play and are taking action. Two friendship centre programs in particular address violence against aboriginal women. One is the moose hide campaign. This is where men wear a small patch of moose hide to symbolize their commitment to stand up against violence towards aboriginal women and children. I am wearing one tonight. To quote my colleague in British Columbia, Paul Lacerte:

> We need to speak up and take positive action, and we need to support each other as Aboriginal men in our healing journey.

Another program is Taking Care of Each Other's Spirit. This is a campaign undertaken by the Ontario Federation of Indian Friendship Centres to address the abuse of women in aboriginal communities across Ontario. The tools provide communities with a road map for an action plan to end violence against aboriginal women, while providing resources for aboriginal women who may be experiencing violence or who are at risk.

I am amongst a distinguished panel here today, so I want to keep my remarks brief and allow the committee time to do its work. I wanted to leave with some parting thoughts on the way forward. First, I believe we need to articulate a set of shared goals at a community, regional, and national level.

Second, we need to set aside perceived areas of influence and jurisdiction—that's within cities, within provinces, and within communities—and build a model of collective action that empowers community action. The Prince Albert hub model may provide some key insights as to how we can do this. It isn't about the money; its about the effort.

Last, we need to show leadership. We need to use our collective clout, power, and influence to move communities, to move governments, and to allow for new forms of integrated action.

Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

I'll turn it over to you, National Chief Atleo.

National Chief Shawn A-in-chut Atleo (National Chief, Assembly of First Nations): [*Witness speaks in Nuu-chah-nulth*]

Greetings. I am A-in-chut.

[*Witness speaks in Nuu-chah-nulth*]

I want to join others in acknowledging that we're here in unceded Algonquin territories.

It's my privilege to offer up some thoughts as National Chief of the Assembly of First Nations. As I said, I am A-in-chut, or Shawn, Atleo.

I am joined here tonight by my colleagues.

With me is Alberta Regional Chief Cameron Alexis, who holds the national portfolio with the Assembly of First Nations executive. We have executive members representing 10 regions from coast to coast to coast. He carries the executive responsibilities for justice matters, has also served his community as chief, and brings with him over 20 years as a police officer with the RCMP.

Also with me is Charlene Belleau, a former chief of Alkali Lake first nation.

Thanks to the chair for acknowledging that she is a former chief herself.

She works with the Assembly of First Nations and, in my view, has demonstrated some of the most important leadership on the issues that are before us this evening at this committee, as well as in her community, in addressing safety, security, justice, and healing issues.

I really appreciate the opportunity to be here and to provide you with contributions to your recommendations.

In doing so, the Assembly of First Nations would like to recognize you, Dr. Carolyn Bennett, for your leadership in introducing the motion to create this committee.

We also recognize the support among all parties that was given to moving this forward. We welcomed the reconstitution, Madam Chair, of this committee in the new session of Parliament. I wanted to share that with all of you.

You've heard from a number of witnesses at this point and have a clear understanding of the contexts and the background, and I will not spend time going over that with you this evening.

We know there are many factors that work together to increase the vulnerability of indigenous women and girls: that historical, socio-economic, and legal realities have come together to create the conditions that allow this violence against indigenous women and girls to persist. You also know that it is simply and sadly true that there continue to be unacceptable levels of violence against indigenous peoples, particularly women and girls. The safety of indigenous women and girls is central to the health and well-being of all of our nations.

The factors that have led to the current rates of violence are absolutely complex, and they're intersecting, as was just articulated. Therefore, our responses must similarly be comprehensive, and they must be far-reaching.

At the 2012 annual general assembly of the Assembly of First Nations, over 800 chiefs, leaders, and citizens made a pledge to “live violence free and to personally work to achieve safety and security for all Indigenous peoples—women and men, girls and boys”. At the 2012 Council of the Federation, the premiers took up this pledge as a reminder in their professional and personal lives of the responsibility to ensure the safety of indigenous women and girls.

Since that time, thousands of first nations citizens and Canadians alike have taken the pledge. The pledge is clear recognition that ending violence and ensuring the safety and security of all citizens, particularly those most vulnerable, is everyone's responsibility.

Change starts within all of us, and we all have a role to play. In April of this year, the Assembly of First Nations and the Native Women's Association of Canada together convened a national forum on community safety and ending violence. We came together to identify the key elements and actions that needed to be brought forward for prevention, response, and ongoing support.

Specific actions were identified under broad themes of addressing structural/state violence and racism, rebuilding strong and healthy communities through capacity-building and support, increasing and strengthening partnerships, and building awareness and account-ability. We've provided all of this to you, this national action plan, and I encourage you to incorporate it into your findings.

In the preparations leading up to this joint event, we summarized recommendations from previous inquiries and studies, and I remarked that if we stacked up all of the reports and studies related to first nations justice matters and violence, this body of work would simply tower over all of us. We don't lack for reflection. What we lack is accountability, and what we lack is action.

When I and others met with the Prime Minister last January and spoke specifically about a national inquiry into missing and murdered women, he responded that he had not yet seen the evidence that another inquiry could make a difference. Instead, he wanted to know what actions should be taken. I've heard these words echoed since by the Minister of Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development.

● (1920)

I want to be very clear with all of you tonight. The families who have lost loved ones—mothers, sisters, daughters, and friends—are not asking for more study to delay moving forward on what we know needs to happen. The AFN is not in any way saying that we sit back and not undertake the needed efforts now to stop violence against indigenous women and girls. Instead, I want you to know that a national public commission of inquiry is critical for accountability and to create change. What has prevented us from moving forward in the past? Has it been cost, negligence, or has it been oversight?

The children, families, and communities that have been indelibly marked by violence deserve answers and accountability towards the future, a commitment that we all strive to achieve safety.

I believe you have a unique and very powerful role and I urge you to use it for the best outcomes. Structural change and achieving true reconciliation in this country, overcoming decades of failed and oppressive laws and policy, will take time, but there are immediate actions this committee can recommend take place, actions that demonstrate the commitment and political will needed to create change.

These actions include the creation of an independent national public commission of inquiry on violence against indigenous women and girls with a focus on developing action plans to address violence and the factors that lead to it, one that is inclusive and reflective of the perspectives of indigenous women, communities, and the families of missing and murdered women.

We seek a clear and unmitigated commitment to taking action demonstrated through the creation of a national public action plan. Indigenous communities, organizations, provinces and territories, are advancing strategies to end violence, but without clearly articulated national goals and coordinated efforts led by the federal government these initiatives will not fully address the magnitude of response required to prevent and end violence against indigenous women and girls and bring accountability to the families of those who are missing and murdered.

Thirdly, there need to be immediate increased investments in front-line services and shelters on reserve and in rural areas so that every first nations woman and girl experiencing violence has access to immediate support. As well, there needs to be a coordinated focus on prevention among youth and across populations, with particular outreach to remote communities and, as was expressed, in the urban centres.

You've heard from police services, and our work has brought forward specific recommendations for police that are worth noting here and in your final report. Police services need to work together to produce verifiable numbers on incidents of violence against indigenous women and girls so that progress can be measured. Adequate sustainable resources are required for first nations police services. Compulsory protocols are needed between and amongst police services to share information and immediately respond to and appropriately investigate reports of missing persons by indigenous families.

In conclusion, addressing violence against indigenous women and girls is all of our responsibility: individuals, elected representatives, legislators, and police. I believe we know what the solutions are. What is needed now is the commitment, the will, and the leadership to get there.

Thank you.

● (1925)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Over to you, Ms. Crowder, for seven minutes.

Ms. Jean Crowder (Nanaimo—Cowichan, NDP): Thank you very much.

I want to thank the witnesses for coming before us on this very difficult topic, and I appreciate both the national chief and Mr. Cyr's referencing the number of reports and studies that have already been done. We hear this from women, their families, and aboriginal organizations from coast to coast to coast that people certainly want to see the national inquiry but they also want to see action.

We had the opportunity to look at the national action plan that was developed. It is a very thorough action plan. You mentioned a couple of points out of that action plan, National Chief, and I wanted to touch on a couple of others.

Of the two others I wanted to mention specifically, first is the local community action grants to support the development of community action plans.

I think, Mr. Cyr, you mentioned the community action plans specifically.

And second, there's the question of creating a national public awareness and prevention campaign on violence against indigenous women and girls.

If you were to recommend three key immediate steps, what would your top three be out of probably about eight or ten that were listed at the end of this report? What are your top three?

National Chief Shawn A-in-chut Atleo: Thank you.

Just to be clear, I think the action plan is absolutely in parallel with the call for the national public commission of inquiry, and I think that must be emphasized, because some may think the national public commission of inquiry is about what's happened over the course of history. This is something we're talking about that's happened in the past. What we're talking about are the two to three on a weekly basis who we learn about who've gone missing. We, like many agencies, including, I'm sure, the friendship centres and others, become involved in supporting families. For us it very often ends up being Charlene, and perhaps she can offer some additional reflections on your question.

I want to emphasize that as part of a response to your question. I think there's some sentiment that this is about what's happened in the past. This is absolutely about what's happening right now, and it's about pulling the veil back and having this country understand the depth of the crisis being faced, and for there to be a shared sense of obligation in this country about what's happening right now.

I know that goes only part way. Maybe I can ask Charlene to touch on the balance of what came out of the action plan, and help reflect the high-level priorities that would flow from it. They're all important.

● (1930)

Ms. Charlene Belleau (Assembly of First Nations): Thank you, National Chief.

Thank you for the invitation to be here tonight. In coming to the committee, I was thinking that we may be concerned about what's happened in the past, but the national chief is correct that we do respond on a weekly basis to cases of missing or murdered women across the country. We do receive regular reports from police agencies. Even if I were to reflect on the last 30 days, so that you have some sense that this is not a historical problem but a current problem, we have responded to at least two homicides—of a 21-year-old female and a 24-year-old female. One 17-year-old female committed suicide. When you think of the root causes of the suicide, was there violence before? There was one female 14-year-old. Another, a 15-year-old female, was, fortunately, found. One female, a 12-year-old child, has gone missing. Out of those six, one was found. They are from all regions of the country, just so you know they're not specifically from one province. They are from across the country.

Two males, one 16-year-old and one 21-year-old, were also murdered. I've included them, because, to me, our men are suffering as well.

This gives you an idea of the current cases. These are 30 days old, so it's not like these are from 10 or 15 years ago. We have those as well. To me it's important to outline what is so upsetting and shocking. It's that these women are dying very young and with very violent deaths, very violent. The alleged perpetrators in most cases are still out there, because police haven't been able to resolve those cases, so families continue to live in trauma from the loss of their daughters. There are children left behind. In Picton alone, there were 77 children left behind by mothers who were murdered. So the impact is huge across various jurisdictions, I think, when we look at the loss of a mother and the children left behind. I think there is a lot to say about what is going on, but even that snapshot that in 30 days this many women could be murdered, this many women could be missing, this many children are missing shows that our communities are in a crisis and they need the inquiry.

I think that's all I want to cover for now unless there's anything else to add.

Ms. Jean Crowder: Thank you for that, Ms. Belleau.

I think it's important to remind people that this is not historical; this is ongoing. Dr. Olsen Harper and Ms. Brazeau appeared before us, just in the previous hour, and they indicated that when it comes to violence against aboriginal women and girls, it's likely under-reported and that there are far more cases out there than have come forward. Do you think that reflects your experience as well?

Ms. Charlene Belleau: I come from a community where we've enjoyed at least 30 years of sobriety, and we know that the alcohol and drug abuse were just symptoms of deeper problems. We needed to get to the root causes of why our people were drugging and drinking in the first place.

We had the opportunity over the last 30 years to develop community-based programs that would allow us to create a safe space to deal with violence against women, the sexual abuse that happened in residential schools, and what we in turn perpetrated among each other within the community—the sexual abuse, the incest within our communities. We did those in conjunction with police agencies, with the full support of crown council, with the full support of judges. And we know from that experience that for any one victim, there are 20, 30 offenders. For any one offender, there are 20, 30 victims. So the whole community eventually is involved.

In the healing process that we've set up through our community to deal with that abuse and violence.... If we are to be successful in the work we need to do with violence against women, certainly it starts within our own communities, but also it requires working closely with the various provincial and federal jurisdictions. At the same time, for sure we need the inquiry so that we can uncover and know the full extent and truth of what is happening to our women and our children within our communities, not only in one region but also across the country. The cases I just referred you to—even over the last 30 days—are from every province across the country. It's extensive.

Thank you.

● (1935)

The Chair: Thank you so much. We appreciate that.

Over to you, Mr. Strahl.

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

Thank you to the panellists for being here to share your testimony with us today. It's a difficult issue we're dealing with.

I'm thinking of my constituent, Ernie Crey, a Stó:lo elder who lost his sister in British Columbia in a very high-profile case. It was one of the cases that led to the B.C. Missing Women Commission of Inquiry.

As British Columbians, perhaps we followed that inquiry a little more closely than others. It was on the news all the time. It was a very high-profile commissioner. As I recall, it slowly disintegrated. Certain individuals didn't want to participate, certain groups didn't participate, others halfway through the process didn't find it satisfactory. As a commission of inquiry, that perhaps isn't exactly what was envisioned. There were very high hopes for it. It made its recommendations a year ago almost to the day, and I don't think anyone is any further along the road to reconciliation, to implementing the solutions. You said, “We know what the solutions are,” and perhaps that commission had some solutions revealed.

National Chief, to you as a fellow British Columbian, what did you take out of that inquiry? What was learned from it? I don't know that anyone would look at that process and say, “Boy, that's something we need to replicate at a national level.”

National Chief Shawn A-in-chut Atleo: I thank you, Mr. Strahl, not just as a fellow British Columbian, but as one who had close relatives whose remains were found on that farm, I often found myself supporting family to try to find missing individuals from my community in the downtown eastside.

Mr. Cyr articulated the wide range of reasons, which I chose not to go into tonight because I think this committee knows them more than most. To understand the challenge to first nations in trusting the systems that are intended to serve them, be they police, be they government—the kinds of experiences we've had and the one that occurred in the provincial inquiry. I think the first piece is to recognize that we're supporting this on a national scale and it requires a national response and, in our opinion, a strong national lead.

Parliament accepted that and continued the work of this committee, which in many respects was welcome, but it is also a recognition that this is a major issue that needs national attention and national leadership.

The earlier question about the three or four things is extremely challenging. The purpose of the public inquiry is to engage in this on a national scale: the accountability aspect of it and having it led in a way that learns in some respects from other inquiries that have been felt to be less than satisfactory.

Indigenous peoples in this country have experience working in partnership with the federal government. There's every reason we can learn from the good experiences, as well as learn from experiences that have fallen short of what we would have hoped to come out of it.

To a certain extent I was involved in my former work as regional chief for British Columbia. I think the depth of involvement could be something to learn from, the meaningful involvement of the families that are directly impacted, having them help to forge an approach that feels right, that instills us with a sense of trust that we can have these conversations in this country and that there will not be a sense of a power imbalance in the way the work unfurls.

If that is up front and you have that, then I think you have a much better chance of success at sharing responsibility, because that's the theme of what you've heard from the presenters here tonight—a shared sense of responsibility. I think there are elements we can look at, not just the inquiry that happened in B.C., but other inquiries. We can learn from those experiences.

Very clearly, the context of this is tremendously different. We end up working in every region of the country. To pick up on the last question, I think this committee has the opportunity to call for a full national public commission of inquiry.

But the first on the short list of three is to support the development of a national public action plan, where indigenous communities, different organizations, come together to articulate national goals that this committee says is required at this time, to get on with that action, and get on with supporting a nationally developed action plan that brings the voices together.

Second, there needs to be an immediate response to the shelter needs. I think Charlene alluded to this in some respects, the fact that every woman and girl needs to be able to have access to services. Right now that does not exist. With emphasis on the rural, I join in calling for those in the urban program.

Third, to round it out, we need a coordinated focus on prevention. Charlene talked about when these instances come up what's happened in that family already to lead to an increased vulnerability? She has experience, as many do, supporting the healing work that's happening in the communities.

I understand the question, and there's a sense that there's some reticence, that because of what happened in one jurisdiction, it doesn't apply nationally. This absolutely applies nationally. We're looking to you as a committee to call for a full national public commission of inquiry.

● (1940)

The Chair: We'll move over to you, Ms. Bennett, for seven minutes.

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: Thanks very much.

Thank you to all of you.

Congratulations, firstly, on the conference in Edmonton in April. I thought it was really, really important. Everybody came together, I think, in a united purpose.

Since that time, the action plan, “Updated draft—for full discussion and input”, which I think is before all members of the committee, was released in July 2013. Can you just tell me what the status is since the draft was released? Is there ongoing work? Looking at the ten points my colleague referred to in terms of direct implementation, a lot of it is very specific first nations. How close are we to an action plan if we actually...?

It looks like you've done a lot of the work, as have many others. But from the urban setting and friendship centres to native women to obviously the Inuit specific roles, how would you come together to get that national action plan where we could just get on with the things that you've outlined here?

● (1945)

National Chief Shawn A-in-chut Atleo: First of all, there is ongoing work on the framework. A resolution was adopted at our annual general assembly this last summer.

To be clear, in responding to Jean Crowder earlier request that I choose three key steps, they essentially round up to four—the call for the public commission of inquiry. The first of the three is to look to you as a committee to call for a coordinated national action plan.

We did this work, the Assembly of First Nations. We worked with the Native Women's Association of Canada. There are many others, though. You just heard from the friendship centres. As you rightfully reflected, the Métis and the Inuit and many others, grassroots and other organizations, including political, at the regional and other levels, are concerned about this issue and are doing work on this issue.

I think the first piece is to talk about how this committee can call for the recommendation of national objectives, of national goals, and the plans that have been worked on.

In particular, maybe the regional chief wants to talk about that particular session that was held. As portfolio holder, he was responsible for that.

Maybe if it's okay with the chair, then, I'll ask the regional chief to pick up on that.

The Chair: Please go ahead.

Chief Cameron Alexis (Alberta Regional Chief, Assembly of First Nations): Thank you very much, Chair.

Thank you very much members of the committee. I'll be very brief, for the sake of time.

As a former police person, I co-chaired the forum, and the forum was excellent in that we allowed all people who were affected to speak openly about their experiences, historical, current, and ongoing. It was very painful to listen to a lot of the submissions.

I support the National Chief in that the inquiry, action, and programs have to begin immediately. Action has to happen because the situation is going on as we speak. All-inclusive programs have to be delivered from the ground up. In other words, the aboriginal people should be fully immersed and consulted on the situations, from their community right into the urban centres or the municipalities.

As a former police person, I can tell you there is a lot of work to do, and the word “racism” will come out, because I've observed it. I did work in B.C. As a matter of fact, I worked in Chilliwack. I think that's where Mr. Strahl comes from. There are about 15 first nation communities in the valley. A lot of times, you can't even tell which is the nation or which is the municipality.

There are issues of territorial jurisdiction, perhaps, by police services that have to come together in unison.

My elder—who is a former chief and my uncle—often reminded me that the first nation people, the aboriginal people have been studied to death. What we need is action. What we need are programs. I reiterate this as well because I've heard it several times now: it is a Canadian problem. This is not just a first nations or aboriginal problem. This is the responsibility of this country, and we are all included. There are no silos, no territories in terms of programs. It's all-inclusive: education, health, justice, policing. We are all impacted, and we have to work together to address this issue for the future of this country. In my observation, this country is still developing, and we have to develop it collectively.

With that, *isniyés*. In my language that means thank you. [*Witness speaks in his native language*] means good, good work. I hope your work has results.

Thank you.

The Chair: You have another minute if you would like to use it.

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: Go ahead, Jeff.

Mr. Jeffrey Cyr: I'll briefly add a few comments.

I very much share the comments of the National Chief and my fellow panellist, Cameron, on shared responsibility and the fundamental nature of this Canadian problem, which we have jointly created over time and can only jointly solve over time. It takes concerted action. It takes concerted leadership from those around this table and around your table.

It does take immediate action, and I would call on your committee to start that action immediately. It seems to me that your mandate is to deal with this issue from a national level. There is enough expertise. Enough people know what's going on.

I don't think the solutions are that far out of reach, but I really would strive towards a collective national goal-setting of some sort. I'm happy to work with the AFN on its action plan to set goals in the urban centres—we're almost always on the same page on these goals, about how to get there—and to give the full support of my organization across this country to help achieve those goals.

I believe it's going to take the empowerment of the communities at the local level, and that empowering can come from the national level.

● (1950)

The Chair: Thank you so much.

We'll go over to you, Ms. McLeod, for seven minutes.

Mrs. Cathy McLeod (Kamloops—Thompson—Cariboo, CPC): Thank you, Madam Chair.

I think as we all come to these meetings we reflect on some of the reasons we're here. I certainly want to note that today is the one-year anniversary of the very tragic murder of 16-year-old CJ Fowler in Kamloops.

That murder has not been solved as of yet. I look at the pictures in the newspaper today of this beautiful girl with a pink hoodie, and know the very violent end she met. I think our hearts are all wanting to work towards solutions, and it's really coming up with the solutions of how we can get to where we need to be. It was December 5 one year ago, so today is a difficult day for her family especially. You look at the pictures, and it's very tragic.

This leads me to the fact that this was in an urban setting. It was a girl visiting from a more remote community. Mr. Cyr indicated that a lot of this is happening in the urban settings. One of the things I've noticed about friendship centres is their incredible ability to do so much with so little. Certainly when I look at the interior friendship centre I see the breadth of what they do.

As the friendship centre, as the person responsible, how do you see your organizations fitting into tackling this problem? You talked earlier about the different levels—the national level, the community level—at which we need to tackle it. Could you talk a little bit about your organization at these different levels?

Mr. Jeffrey Cyr: Sure. I'll try to be brief, conscious of the time here.

Friendship centres, like first nations, operate on all three levels: a national body, regional bodies, and community-driven bodies. Communities actually create friendship centres. We don't create them. They're created by the communities they're in.

At the national level, while I can participate with my colleagues here at this table, and with you in Ottawa, and around the country, on national goal-setting and those issues that we discussed before, I think real action—a real interaction—will happen at the community level. That's where you find the heart and soul of friendship centres. They're in the communities.

They have partnerships. They know who the community players are. They know who the vulnerable people are and how they can be helped. It's an interaction between police forces, social services, other human services organizations, and education, as you heard in the panel before ours. They all have to come together collectively, which is why I described the Prince Albert hub model as a collective approach that looks at where interventions occur and how people can work together.

While our organization can have impact and effect at each level, real change is going to need the communities to be empowered to do that. National governments and provincial governments empower those communities.

Mrs. Cathy McLeod: Ms. Belleau, we talked about rural and remote shelters. I have a background in health care and I've worked in rural and remote communities. We always had a struggle with the whole concept of shelters. In urban settings, they're very careful in terms of the anonymity, even in smaller communities of 90,000. I always have worried about shelters, and the role of shelters in small communities, where of course everyone knows where the shelters are, and the necessary safeguards.

Can you talk a little bit about that? I really struggle to think that those are sort of successful support models. Maybe you can share with me why they are a successful support model in a remote community.

● (1955)

Ms. Charlene Belleau: Good. Thank you.

I want to ask the national chief to respond to the issue on CJ Fowler first, and then I'll follow up with a response on the urban and the first nation community shelters.

National Chief Shawn A-in-chut Atleo: Thank you.

We know that the family is going through a ceremony tonight. Charlene and I were with the family up home, where they come from, in the Gitanmaax area just outside of Terrace. This is the reason for the need for this to be such a coordinated effort: the ebb and flow of our peoples between communities, between the urban and the rural settings.

They had asked us a year ago today to be there. I want to acknowledge Matilda and Glen, who are going through that ceremony for their late daughter CJ. We were with them the day they went in to identify the body. It was a year ago today.

To see the incredible array of challenges these people face, including the deep poverty, the issues with child welfare, with education, where we are making every effort to make shifts, changes, and improvements, and with the coordination between jurisdictions on things like policing, and yes, even the efforts in having coroners appreciate, recognize, and support the incredible challenges that first nations face, it's the full spectrum.

This is where we find ourselves and our organizations. In this case, it is Charlene in particular who I hold in such high regard, because she often is the first line of contact with these families on our behalf. Because the structures aren't necessarily there. The Native Women's Association and so many others are doing everything they can. This is where we can't compel you enough to understand the opportunity that you have to gravitate as forcefully, as respectfully, but as strongly as possible to this issue, knowing that we have another family going through ceremony tonight, reliving what happened a year ago.

That is but one of so many experiences that we can draw from—all the more reason why we want to see and encourage you to consider such a strong move.

We wanted to honour the memory of the late CJ. We were in the room with her parents when this moment occurred. We know that they are in ceremony, and we know that if the opportunity gave rise to it this evening, they wanted us to share it. You prompted it. I want to recognize and thank you for doing that.

We're talking about real people right across this entire country, and absolutely this is emotional, so we emote. This is not just an intellectual conversation that is happening, and it should be an emotional one for the country, to say that we have a shared obligation.... Then let's get into having these action plans developed that include questions such as shelters. I was at the Canadian Centre for Child Protection yesterday. I was so moved, impressed, and excited by that work about what's happening to children right now in families and communities. I want to see us move into the space where we talk about the protection of families and children immediately. This is the leadership role that you can play.

On the specific question of shelters, Charlene—

The Chair: I'm going to interrupt you there for a minute, because we are well past Ms. McLeod's time.

I'll let you know, Ms. Ashton, that there are about two minutes left in the meeting, so please go ahead.

Ms. Niki Ashton: Just quickly, I want to thank you very much, and thank you for sharing your emotion on behalf of the families.

Last night I got notice that a young woman, Robin Anne Redhead, 19 years old, from Shamattawa First Nation, one of the most impoverished first nations in Manitoba, went missing in my hometown of Thompson. I think of her family and the community that is hurting. In an urban centre where we struggle to come together to try to offer the support to try to find this family....each one of our communities is affected, and we share that pain with you.

National Chief, I want to ask you to share some final thoughts with us before the time wraps up. Thank you.

● (2000)

National Chief Shawn A-in-chut Atleo: Both of my colleagues were just reflecting on the question about shelters and the sense that there aren't enough services that are there and that we need the communities to design the approaches that are going to work. We need an action plan that brings together thoughtful consideration, and the very best knowledgeable people in the area supporting the safety and security of those most vulnerable in any society.

This should be the measure by which we reflect on ourselves as a country. The fact is this is absolute reality. This is a human rights crisis, as groups like Amnesty have called it. The UN Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, in part of his reflections after he spent some time speaking with communities across the country, has called for a full national public commission of inquiry.

Absolutely, it links to the wide array of challenges we face, whether it's the acknowledgement of our treaties.... We also recognize that it's been a year since Idle No More really captured the attention of the country. First nations on and off reserve, status and non status, Inuit, and Métis stood shoulder to shoulder with average Canadians who joined our people and said this has to change.

We have unprecedented engagement by our peoples from across the country. We have an unprecedented engagement of young people, and they're incredibly inspiring. They want to see us construct a better present, and a better future.

I do believe that the Idle No More movement was led largely by young people.

In the 1960s and 1970s we had only a dozen or so people in post-secondary education. We now have 30,000 educated indigenous people with post-secondary levels of education.

I do believe that Canada is beginning...through the good work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and their work will continue for another year.

We heard from Dr. Bernice King, the daughter of the late Martin Luther King, when she spoke at a rally of 70,000 people marching in Vancouver, standing shoulder to shoulder, side by side with residential school survivors, compelling the country to understand that this is not the time for lip service; this is the time for life service.

This is a moment at which in my view, as I said at the outset, you as a committee hold in this room incredible responsibilities and opportunities to gravitate to the centre of this, to say to Canada, “We are going to be open an accountable”. We're a first-world country, the third-wealthiest recognized country in the world, and we have a tragedy of just incomprehensible levels that has flowed from decades of oppression and policies like that on residential schools. It's time that, as a country, we just acknowledge this, accept shared responsibility for it, and develop an approach that is rightfully led by the federal government. You, as a national committee, have the opportunity to step directly in and take on that leadership.

We will join you with the work we've been doing. In Winnipeg recently the Aboriginal Affairs ministers' working group along with groups like the Inuit and the Métis agreed that we would work on this. You've just heard the executive director of the National Association of Friendship Centres say they'll do the work.

What we're looking for is leadership from you as a committee.

We see this as also flowing, importantly, from the apology from 2008 by the Prime Minister to my late grandmother and the residential school survivor generations who are still struggling with sharing the stories.

I know this is a struggle for Canada to really reflect on, but it's a moment at which Canada can demonstrate leadership. Indigenous rights are human rights, and for us to shine as a champion of human rights around the world, this work has to happen right here and right now.

The Chair: Thank you.

On that note, I'm going to bring the meeting to an end.

Before I do that let me just bring up a little piece of housekeeping for the committee members here at the table with regard to our meeting on Monday with the families. I'd just like to tell you that the agenda for the morning will be as follows. The next time we see each other will be Monday morning, so I invite you to an informal pre-meeting gathering at 10 a.m. in the ante room to the Aboriginal Peoples room.

The meeting itself with families will be held at 11 a.m. to 1 p.m. in the Aboriginal Peoples room. That's on the Senate side of Centre Block on Parliament Hill in the House of Commons.

We will have lunch from 1 p.m. until 2 p.m. with the families. It will be just an informal, casual lunch where we can continue the conversation over some good food, and then we'll see you all in question period.

I would like to say thank you to the witnesses for being here, for giving us your expertise and your viewpoint, and for adding so much to our study. We really appreciate that you are here and have spent this time with us on a Thursday evening. Thank you so much.

The meeting is adjourned.