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Mr. Bryan May

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

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● (0805)

[*English*]

The Chair (Mr. Bryan May (Cambridge, Lib.)): Good morning, everybody.

I welcome John Brassard to our committee to replace Mr. Zimmer for today.

I would like to officially welcome Madame Sansoucy to this committee. As we know, our former member of this committee is moving on to a higher pursuit.

Welcome also to everybody here. Pursuant to Standing Order 108 (2) and the motion adopted by the committee on Monday, June 13, 2016, the committee is resuming its study on poverty reduction strategies.

Today is the last day of witness testimony for this almost year-long study. We've gone coast to coast and met with a number of great organizations and individuals. I'm very excited that we will soon be tabling a report on this very important topic.

I would like to welcome today a number of witnesses to speak. From the City of Toronto we have Pamela McConnell, deputy mayor. From the Canadian Association for Community Living we have Michael Bach, executive vice-president. From the Advocacy Centre for Tenants Ontario we have Magda Barrera and Mary Todorow. From United Way Toronto and York Region, we have Pedro Barata. As an individual, we have Donald K. Johnson, member of the advisory board, Bank of Montreal Capital Markets.

We have a full panel. We're going to start with opening statements from each of you. Because we have such a large group and a tight timeline, I'm going to ask that you keep your comments to seven minutes. If you see the red light go on, it's my very polite way to say that you're out of time.

To start us off, from the City of Toronto, Pamela McConnell, the next seven minutes are yours.

Mrs. Pamela McConnell (Deputy Mayor, City of Toronto): Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you for the opportunity to address the committee on such a very important issue as poverty reduction strategy.

I'm very aware that you've already heard from our staff, and I very much appreciate that they've talked to you about the technical elements of our poverty reduction strategy, which is called “TO Prosperity”. I'm therefore going to focus my remarks on my perspective as deputy mayor responsible for this role, and also on looking at the innovation and collaboration that we can have between orders of government, because that's a very important piece of it.

I will just remind you that on November 4, 2015, almost two years ago, the city council unanimously adopted the TO Prosperity strategy. It's a 20-year prosperity plan to advance equity, opportunity, and, obviously, prosperity for all Toronto residents, and to build a strong safety net as well as a lifeline to keep people out of poverty and to pull them out if they get there.

It's a systems strategy and focuses on five different issues, all of which are in our jurisdiction; we focus only on our jurisdiction. They are housing stability, transit equity, service access, food access, and quality jobs and livable wages—sort of like the fingers on your hand —with an equity lens and systemic change.

We have three overriding objectives that guide our work.

The first is to address immediate needs, or what some call the “low-hanging fruit”, and it is really, for many, something that can make a big difference in their lives immediately. Therefore, I want to ensure that these vital services are well funded, well coordinated, and meet the immediate needs of our people who are living in poverty. I've worked with the FCM, and I can tell you that in Toronto there's a huge difference in the numbers, with one in four children living in poverty as opposed to 8% across the country.

Second, we must create pathways to prosperity. We want to ensure that city programs and all the services are integrated, client-centred, and focused on early intervention.

The third is to drive systemic change. We want to leverage the economic power of the city to stimulate job growth through things such as social procurement, which is a very important policy piece; to support local businesses in their drive to help; and, to drive inclusive economic growth and tackle deep-rooted social inequities.

There are some areas, obviously, in which the city has many tools, resources, and opportunities, and we can use those as an authority to lead and to take meaningful action. In other areas, the city looks to collaboration with other orders of government, and that's really what I'm here to push today. We also work with the private sector. Jobs on Bay Street are very important, as is labour, which helped in some of our youth employment and in community organizations that we collaborate with.

At the city, we are very encouraged that the federal government is committed to developing a new poverty reduction strategy, and more and more municipalities—as I said, I'm on the board of the FCM—and the provinces are developing strategies as well. What I would suggest to you is that they need to all come together. Given that there's enormous economic potential for collaboration and coordination, it seems to me that we have an obligation as well.

To be very clear, without resources and the support of the federal government, the efforts of cities—our city and others—and other efforts within the city of Toronto cannot have the desired impact. There are three areas that I would emphasize where there should be intergovernmental collaboration; coordination has been an enormous need and has an enormous potential for us. Those areas are housing, child care, and transit. I'm sure you've heard that right across the country. These are the key components that most of the existing poverty reduction strategies across the country are focusing on, and I would suggest that the committee look very carefully at these things.

● (0810)

In my view, the federal poverty reduction strategy in housing should be very closely aligned with the national housing strategy, which I hope is going to be released later on in 2017, and should include significant investments in building affordable housing, ownership housing, and maintaining and repairing social housing—I'd underscore that.

As Mayor Tory has stressed, the lack of affordable rental and ownership housing in Toronto, combined with the terrible state of repair of much of our social housing, is undermining the quality of our residents' lives, denying the residents their basic rights, and negatively impacting Toronto's economy and its capacity to attract new business and new business investment.

As we suggested, regarding the national strategy, there are several opportunities for immediate action by the federal government that would have an immediate impact. For example, it is the position of the city, as well as the FCM, that it should maintain existing levels of funding and reinvest savings from the expiring social housing agreement. We've pushed for that over quite a period of time.

In our city, as in others, we're trying to help people avoid poverty. Therefore, it's important that we invest in the capital repairs for the TCHC, our housing company. That's an urgent need, and a massive one, so we require a lot of support from you, the federal government, to repair that essential infrastructure. It's an ask of $864 million, and we know that's a lot, but we've put our money in and we're asking the federal and the provincial governments to match that. Of course, as you well know, our population keeps growing, so we also need to build more affordable housing.

We have a couple of long-term investments that I would suggest to you. One of them is also the position of the federation.

We're calling for $12.6 billion in phase two for social infrastructure over the next eight years. We've been working very hard to lobby for that and we're waiting for March 22. In addition to that, however, we have what's called the mayor's “open door” program. It has various incentives such as taxation waivers, and it helps us to develop our program. We think you could do that.

The second and third ones, I think, are more obvious to you. They include child care. The national framework for early learning and child care is coming onto the agenda, and we would hope that you're working with that. Perhaps you would like to know that if you have a child in Toronto and put your child into child care and have no subsidy, it's $2,350 a month. It's hugely expensive.

● (0815)

The Chair: Yes, if you can find it.

Mrs. Pamela McConnell: That's right.

The last one is transit. Transit, of course, is not just about building infrastructure, but also about allowing access to it. I know that Calgary has just gone down to a $5-a-month pass. We have implemented a pass. It's not $5, but we hope that it will be.

In conclusion, I would encourage you to continue to think about these things across the country, to think about us in Toronto, with the highest population in poverty, and to think about our 20-year strategy and how we need to work together to get there.

Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Now we'll go to Michael Bach, executive vice-president of the Canadian Association for Community Living.

The next seven minutes are yours, sir.

Mr. Michael Bach (Executive Vice-President, Canadian Association for Community Living): Thank you, Mr. Chair and members of the committee, for the opportunity to be here today.

The Canadian Association for Community Living is a national federation of over 200 local associations, provincial and territorial associations, and our national organization. Our mission is to advance the inclusion of people with intellectual disabilities, and we work closely with the cross-disability community.

We are very encouraged by this committee's study on poverty reduction strategies. This has been a primary area of concern for us, given that over 70% of adults with intellectual disabilities who do not live with their families live in poverty. At the outset of your study, we encourage some consideration of what we mean by "poverty". I appreciate the deputy mayor's comments on the need for a multi-sectoral approach.

What do we mean by poverty? We're guided by the definition in the Quebec act through a study we did with the cross-disability community—"Disabling Poverty/Enabling Citizenship"—to combat poverty and social exclusion. I'd like to read for you the definition in that act. Poverty is defined as:

> the condition of a human being who is deprived of the resources, means, choices and power necessary to acquire and maintain economic self-sufficiency or to facilitate integration and participation in society.

As a starting point, we would encourage a comprehensive definition of poverty, which would then take us to thinking about what kinds of investments are required to give people the capabilities and opportunities they need in order to participate. As an overarching frame, we would suggest a capabilities approach developed by Amartya Sen and adopted by the UN development index. Before we get into the details, let's be clear about what we're trying to accomplish, which is to provide people greater power over their own lives so they can participate in the social, economic, and cultural lives of their communities in a way that gives them well-being.

I don't need to go into the details. Our brief will leave you with the details of the realities facing people with disabilities, particularly intellectual disabilities. I'll give you just a couple of highlights.

We're talking about 13% to 14% of the population, or over four million Canadians. Seven out of 10 need help with daily activities. Caregiving of people with disabilities is part of the lives of over eight million Canadians.

Parents who have children with disabilities are much more likely to have to downscale their participation in the labour market or leave it altogether. Consequently, we're seeing that families who have family members with disabilities are more likely to live in poverty as well. This doesn't just affect individuals; it affects families as well.

Almost 700,000 people with disabilities also give care to other people with disabilities. More and more, this is going to be the case with the dramatic aging of the population and the increase in our population of people with cognitive disabilities, traumatic brain injury, etc. All those numbers are going up. That's who we're going to be. Despite how we think of ourselves, despite our ideal of intellectual and physical prowess, more of us are never going to meet that, and certainly, at some point in our lives, we will be nowhere near meeting that. We're an increasingly disabled population, so we need to accept disability as part of the fabric of our personal lives, our families, and our communities.

Because this is a study on poverty reduction strategies, while we have our list of what a strategy for people with disabilities might look like, we are more interested at this point in leaving you with some ways of framing this issue overall. In starting with a broad definition of poverty, and then in terms of a framework for thinking about what poverty means and how it happens, it's very important to start with the outcomes of vulnerable groups. I appreciate that in your terms of reference you've referenced that we should focus on particularly vulnerable groups.

What does "vulnerability" mean when it comes to people with intellectual disabilities? We've identified six key dimensions of exclusion. If we take the starting point in terms of the definition, we're trying to address exclusion. What do we mean by "exclusion"? People are lonely, stigmatized, and isolated.

● (0820)

Up to 50% of people with intellectual disabilities experience chronic loneliness and isolation compared to 15% to 30% of the general population. Over 50% of people with intellectual disabilities experience mental health issues. When the experiences of isolation are combined with low income or a disability, these things start to get compounded. When you add gender into it, you add refugee or immigrant status into it, you add racialized status, or you add indigenous status into this, the issues of exclusion grow.

People with intellectual and cognitive disabilities are four times more likely than the general population to experience violence and victimization. These things start to compound. In terms of income, as I've indicated, over 70% of adults with intellectual disabilities are living in low-income situations. Another dimension is people who lack personal and communication supports at home. More than 50% of children with disabilities do not have access to the needed aids and devices they require.

In terms of homelessness and lack of affordable and adequate housing, we know that on any given night, 35,000 people are homeless in Canada, and the evidence points to a much higher proportion of people with intellectual and other disabilities. Almost 30,000 adults are currently placed in congregate residential facilities, which means they don't have power over their own lives. While in one sense they may have basic needs met in congregate facilities, if we stake our starting point of what poverty means in terms of being socially excluded or not having power over your own life, those people need to be part of a poverty reduction strategy because they don't have power over their own lives.

In Ontario alone, there are 10,000 to 12,000 people on waiting lists for residential services. Their families, according to a report released by the ombudsman of Ontario last year, had absolutely nowhere to turn, which leads to the institutionalization by default because families don't have support. We have a basic sort of infrastructure system in this country that relies on families to provide all caring responsibilities, and it's becoming increasingly unsustainable.

The final dimension of exclusion is that people are powerless. Just yesterday the Law Commission of Ontario released its report on decision-making capacity and legal guardianship, and despite years of advancing proposals to recognize the legal capacity of people with intellectual disabilities and the support they need, the Law Commission has refused to go down that path and has continued to press for guardianship systems despite the United Nations calling Canada out on this.

Our approach is to start with exclusion and those realities of exclusion and then to begin to think about the kinds of areas in which we need to make investments, to understand what those core barriers that result in that kind of exclusion are. From the perspective of disability, perceptions and attitudes of others are critical. Access to communication support is critical. Deaf Canadians in Canada don't have access to the basic interpretive services they require to access health care.

As far as social infrastructure goes, we've talked about social infrastructure in terms of a housing strategy being absolutely critical as well as for indigenous and first nations communities. We would really encourage extending an understanding of social infrastructure to families and investing in family support.

Finally, we need to invest in and ensure that people have basic legal status in this country. The federal government has a role in that, as do the provincial and territorial governments.

I'll leave it there.

● (0825)

The Chair: Thank you very much, sir.

Now from Advocacy Centre for Tenants Ontario, we have Magda Barrera and Mary Todorow.

Ms. Mary Todorow (Research and Policy Analyst, Advocacy Centre for Tenants Ontario): Thank you for inviting me and my colleague Magda Barrera to be part of this important discussion.

The Advocacy Centre for Tenants Ontario, or ACTO, is a community legal clinic funded by Legal Aid Ontario. We provide legal advice and representation to low-income Ontarians. We also work for the advancement of human rights and social justice in housing through law reform, community organizing, and education initiatives. Our focus is on homelessness prevention and bettering the housing conditions for low-income tenants.

Housing costs are the largest expenditure for low-income households. Any federal strategy to reduce poverty must be fully coordinated with a robust and effective national housing strategy, which we believe should be rights-based, adequately funded, and enshrined in legislation. Tenants and people who are homeless are disproportionately among those living in poverty. In renter households across Canada, nearly one in five are paying more than 50% of their income on rent, and they're at serious risk of becoming homeless. Among this group are a disproportionate number of women, especially single parents, indigenous households, seniors, recent immigrants, and people with disabilities, as you just heard.

Crucial to the success of the strategy to reduce poverty among these vulnerable communities is a bold commitment to address, one, the shortfall in supply of new affordable rental housing; two, the retention of existing affordable housing; three, the growing gap between low household incomes and market rents; and four, legal protections for tenants.

Mrs. Magda Barrera (Housing and Economics Policy Analyst, Advocacy Centre for Tenants Ontario): Ontario needs to build about 10,000 new rental units annually to meet the demand of the growing population. We've seen an average of about 3,200 rental completions annually over the last 20 years, much less than half of what we need. The private market has produced plenty of new ownership housing, but it has not delivered a significant number of new purpose-built rental properties, with even fewer affordable rental units.

The housing developed under the cost-shared Ontario-Canada funding program provides affordable rental units, with rents that are on average at or below 80% of CMHC market rents than the local community, but these below-market rents remain unaffordable to people who are homeless or who are on the social housing waiting list. In addition, private for-profit landlords own 35% of the rental housing built in Ontario with funding from these programs. It is shocking to us that projects approved under the rental housing component of the investment in affordable housing program are only required to be affordable for a minimum period of 20 years. This means that over one third of the units built to date will not be permanent public infrastructure with affordable rents over the long term despite a significant investment of public dollars.

We need an affordable housing building program with adequate funding and firm annual targets. In addition, we strongly recommend that all new rental housing developed with public funds should be owned and managed solely by the non-profit sector and remain affordable over the long term, not just 20 years.

● (0830)

Ms. Mary Todorow: Social housing providers, like all residential landlords, are required under the Ontario Residential Tenancies Act to keep their portfolio in a state of good repair and fit for habitation. The replacement cost of the existing social housing portfolio in Ontario is estimated to be $40 billion, while the capital repair deficit for the Toronto Community Housing Corporation alone, the largest social housing landlord in the country, is estimated to be $2.6 billion over the next 10 years. The lack of funding and resulting disrepair is harmful to tenants, and it also sets a poor example for private sector landlords.

The national housing strategy should recognize the massive federal investment in this housing and the need for funding to maintain Canada-wide minimum standards of habitability in these homes.

Mrs. Magda Barrera: The gap between what low-income tenants can afford to pay for their housing and private market rents has caused the number of households on the active waiting list for rent-geared-to-income housing to soar to over 170,000. We understand that a federal housing benefit is being considered that could provide income support to tenants to bridge the gap between an affordable rent and the actual rent. We certainly support an initiative that would provide greater income to low-income tenants. However, any housing benefit policy must be carefully examined in order to prevent such potential downsides as the possibility of rent inflation, the lack of housing choices for tenants when there are low vacancy rates, and the fact that tenants in social housing could end up paying more for their housing if the benefit replacement of the rent-geared-to-income subsidy is at a lower rate.

Ontario is currently conducting a two-year pilot housing benefit program for victims of domestic violence. Housing benefits may be best used in such cases where assistance is needed quickly, and this type of program could be expanded to people experiencing short-term income loss.

Ms. Mary Todorow: We know from our experience that low-income tenants are disadvantaged in the housing market because of inadequacies in the provincial laws that regulate their relations with their landlords. The federal government should encourage strong provincial tenant protection policies. These would include effective rent regulation, protection of the rental housing stock, security of tenure, and fair and accessible dispute resolution that is integrated with homelessness prevention measures.

Comprehensive rent regulation can prevent rent gouging during market upswings, encourage stability in the rental market, and keep long-standing tenants from being pushed out of their homes and neighbourhoods by dramatic rent increases.

We'd like to make just a few brief comments on housing first, which is championed by many as a solution to homelessness. Housing first targets long-term chronically homeless individuals who live on the streets or in shelters. Most of these individuals are men. Many have addictions, often concurrent with a mental health issue. But housing first fails to address the problem of the hidden homeless, and those are the estimated 50,000 people who don't live on the streets or in shelters but who are without a safe, permanent, and stable home on any given night in Canada. As well, housing first doesn't address the prevention of homelessness.

To reduce poverty, we need innovative thinking, but we can't forsake what has worked in the past and what continues to work for hundreds of thousands of Canadians, which is rent-geared-to-income subsidies, publicly owned rental housing, and laws to protect tenants from unfair or opportunistic behaviour by landlords and developers.

Thank you for your attention.

The Chair: Thank you very much to both of you, and I look forward to hearing some of those innovative ideas as the questions start shortly.

Before that, however, we're going to hear from Pedro Barata of United Way Toronto and York Region.

You have seven minutes, sir.

Mr. Pedro Barata (Senior Vice-President, Strategic Initiatives and Public Affairs, United Way Toronto and York Region): Thank you very much.

The last time we were all supposed to get together in this very hotel, the meeting had to be cancelled. For those of us who live here it was a mild annoyance, but for you and the whole team around you, it meant another day away from your families, another day living out of a suitcase, another day re-booking meetings, scheduling meetings, and spending a lot of time on the phone. We want to thank you for the public service you and your support staff are doing on a very important issue, which is of great concern to Canadians and which really requires the multipartisan nature of a dialogue that is not about who's right but about what's right.

● (0835)

The Chair: Thank you for that.

And most importantly, the worst part of it was that we had to stay in his riding for an extra two days. He got to go home early.

Voices: Oh, oh!

Mr. Pedro Barata: I'm sure he was a good host.

It's also fitting that you would end your proceedings, or at least this part of your study, in a place like Toronto. This may not be the generally held consensus around the table, but Toronto's a pretty awesome place in which to live, and it may be one of the best places in the world in which to live. One of the things we are particularly proud of here in Toronto is the fact that, yes, we have a lot of cranes, and yes, we are a beacon of prosperity, but we're also a place where diversity truly is our strength and our motto. It's based on values like fairness, belonging, opportunity, and the kinds of things that really hold our community together.

Those values and all of the things that really make us proud of the places in which we live—Toronto is not alone in this, as these are the same values that hold Canada together—are being compromised by things like the growth of precarious employment in our city; the growing gap between neighbourhoods, between those who are doing well and those who are not doing so well; and the real challenges facing the next generation. What's happening in terms of the intergenerational deal, and what will happen to our legacy in terms of the opportunities for the next generation? The idea of a poverty reduction plan is really the foundation in terms of reinforcing the kinds of values that make this the best country in the world in which to live, so you have a great responsibility that we really appreciate.

There are things around a poverty reduction strategy that we've learned are really important. It starts with having a plan. This is not a one-off. It is not an announcement or a ribbon cutting. It has to be a multi-year endeavour. It helps to have targets and timetables so that we're all pushing in the same direction. It really helps to understand as well that there's no silver bullet. There's no one sector. Government can't do it alone, and neither can the private sector or United Way. We're all part of the solution. Having a plan with a target helps us all push in the right direction.

You will hear a lot about investments and the need for new investments. Those are absolutely required. The Canada child tax benefit is an absolutely historic achievement that will be a game-changer when it comes to moving the needle on child poverty in Canada. We'll begin to see those results fairly soon.

I want to do something different today and talk about, in addition to those investments, five ideas that the federal government could implement. They have very modest or no cost at all, and could start to be implemented right away. I'll try to move through them very quickly.

The first one relates to the very significant investments in infrastructure that the federal government is putting in place. In addition to building roads, bridges, sewers, and the kinds of things that make our communities and economy go, I would urge you to also consider the role of community infrastructure and community hubs. In our own backyard here in Toronto, we're seeing that the city is changing, the region is changing. In some neighbourhoods that were originally built as primarily residential neighbourhoods, those neighbourhoods are changing. They are now destinations for newcomers. They are the places where there is affordable housing. The problem is that those neighbourhoods don't have any community infrastructure. We at United Way, working with many of our partners, have built community hubs, one-stop shops where people can get the services they need. I would encourage you, in the envelope of infrastructure investments, to think about opening up opportunities for community hubs.

Second, also on the infrastructure side, the board of trade in Toronto just released a study showing that 147,000 new jobs will be created in the trades, and they will require new supply. Through infrastructure and community benefits, you can think about not just how you're building transit and other needed hard infrastructure but also how we're connecting people, especially young people who are looking for opportunities, to careers in the trades that they might otherwise never have thought of. We can use a dollar to build not just the things we need but also opportunities for young people. Through projects here in Toronto, we're actually modelling and piloting how some of those approaches could spark partnerships that provide opportunities for people to pursue careers at the same time that we drive our economy.

Third, youth are facing challenges, but not all youth are facing the same kinds of challenges. There's a youth employment strategy that the federal government has in place. It's booked. It's happening. There are investments happening. In terms of the youth who are furthest away from the labour market, who are facing the greatest barriers, we need to really target resources, as part of the youth employment strategy, at those youth. If we don't act, they are the ones who are most likely to fall through the cracks and the ones who are most likely to cost us down the line in terms of health, criminal justice, lost productivity, and all kinds of other costs that will not just compromise our values but also hurt our bottom line.

● (0840)

Fourth, community service infrastructures are absolutely essential, but how do Canadians connect with those services? At 211 is one way. It is a one-stop shop that is 24/7, multilingual, with very high satisfaction rates, and it can connect people to the services they need.

Lastly, the government is investing in a national housing strategy, and, as part of that, we hope it is about to announce a fiscal framework. We think it's time, alongside with new builds, repairs, and addressing homelessness, for a portable housing benefit. That could be a game-changer when it comes to addressing the needs of Canadians. Evidence shows that such benefits, when properly designed, do not inflate rents, complement social housing by freeing up space to those who need it most, and are cost effective. There are five or six provinces that are currently developing housing benefits.

Yes, we need new builds, but those will take time. Yes, we need repairs, but that doesn't give you any new supply. Housing benefits are the most efficient, broad way to start helping Canadians now, and we would encourage you to consider that as part of a national housing strategy and a poverty reduction strategy.

Thank you very much for your time. I look forward to the discussion.

The Chair: Thank you very much, sir.

As somebody who has spent most of my career working with volunteers and advocating in the area of philanthropy, it's an honour to introduce our next witness. He has been recognized at the highest level in this country for his philanthropic work in volunteerism.

The next seven minutes, Mr. Johnson, are yours.

Mr. Donald Johnson (Member, Advisory Board, BMO Capital Markets, As an Individual): First of all, I'd like to thank the committee for inviting me to appear as a witness and to provide some suggestions to help achieve the objectives on this important public policy issue.

While I'm here as an individual, my title is member, advisory board, BMO Capital Markets, and I am a volunteer board member on four not-for-profit organizations. I really am here to speak on behalf of charities that support the people on which your committee is focused.

In further enhancing the skills of working Canadians and providing support for persons with disabilities, a major opportunity exists through a tax-effective measure as an alternative to direct government funding for agencies that provide these services. These organizations, including colleges, universities, and social service agencies such as United Way Centraide can all be rendered more effective by a modest tax amendment.

On behalf of not-for-profit organizations and education, health care, social services, and arts and culture, I made a submission to the House of Commons Standing Committee on Finance during its pre-budget consultation hearings last fall. A copy of my submission is attached to my speaking notes in both English and French. It outlined the opportunity to increase charitable donations by $200 million per annum, which would benefit all Canadians who are served by our charitable organizations.

Our recommendation is that the government remove the capital gains tax on charitable gifts of private company shares and real estate in the 2017 budget, which will be tabled on March 22.

Charitable donations to organizations in the not-for-profit sector are much more tax effective than direct government funding because the fiscal cost is shared between the government and the donor. A portion of the incremental charitable donations would be directed to colleges and universities that provide skills and training to our workforce, including those with disabilities. A portion would also be directed to social service agencies, such as United Way Centraide, that provide such support.

The 2015 budget included a measure such that if the owner of private company shares or real estate sold the asset to an arm's-length party and donated all or a portion of the cash proceeds to a registered charity within 30 days, the donor would be exempt from capital gains tax on that portion donated to a charity. Although the measure was in the budget, it unfortunately was not included in the budget bill that was passed in June 2015, a few months prior to the election, and, consequently, it was not enacted into law. As you may know, the 2016 budget stated that the government was not going to proceed with this measure.

Although it was the Conservative government that tabled the 2015 budget, this measure had the support of all three parties. Scott Brison, who was then finance critic for the Liberal Party and is now President of the Treasury Board, was publicly supportive. Thomas Mulcair, then the leader of the NDP and currently the interim leader, was also supportive. So it is reasonable to assume that both the Conservatives and the NDP would be supportive of this measure if it were included in the 2017 budget.

The case for its inclusion is compelling. First, the forgone capital gains tax on these donations is only $50 million to $60 million a year, and the charitable donation tax credit is the same as for gifts of cash.

Second, because the donor must sell the asset to an arm's-length party, this ensures that he or she receives fair market value for the sale and addresses any concern about valuation abuse.

Third, introducing this measure addresses a current inequity in the Income Tax Act. It provides the same tax treatment for donations of private company shares and real estate that currently applies to gifts of other appreciated capital assets and listed securities.

Entrepreneurs who keep their company private would be treated the same as entrepreneurs who take their company public.

Finally, the vast majority of these donations would be incremental, and would not be a substitution for cash donations.

● (0845)

United Way Toronto and York Region is an excellent example of how the disadvantaged in our society would benefit from this measure. I'm pleased that my colleague Pedro is here from United Way Toronto and York Region and is participating as a witness this morning.

I'd like to share with you how United Way in Toronto has benefited from the removal of the capital gains tax on gifts of listed securities. From 1956 to 1996, the total gifts of listed securities to United Way of Toronto amounted to only $44,000—that's over 40 years. From 1997, when the capital gains tax was cut in half, to 2016, gifts of listed securities to United Way in Toronto totalled over $176 million, as a result of the removal of the capital gains tax on gifts of listed securities. United Way Toronto and York Region provides crucial funding for over 200 agencies in the GTA and the York region. This is a measure that can help significantly in skills and social development.

Now, as your committee's report will not be delivered to the House of Commons until after the 2017 budget, which is going to be tabled on March 22, communication of your support to Minister of Finance Bill Morneau and Prime Minister Justin Trudeau at your earliest opportunity would be much appreciated.

That concludes my remarks. I'd be happy to answer any questions.

The Chair: Thank you, sir.

Now we're going to get started with questions. To start us off, we have MP Poilievre.

You have six minutes, sir.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre (Carleton, CPC): Thank you very much, and thank you to the witnesses.

I'd like to begin with you, Mr. Johnson. Can you repeat the numbers on donations of listed securities to United Way prior to the change that allowed capital gains tax-free donations versus after? You listed an interesting fact. I think you said that $44,000 was donated over 40 years, and after the change it was something like $170 million.

Mr. Donald Johnson: It was $176 million.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: It was $44,000 over what period?

Mr. Donald Johnson: The $44,000 was over 40 years, from when United Way in Toronto was founded in 1956, until 1996. Over that 40 years, there was only $44,000 in gifts of stock. United Way was the only organization I could find that kept a record of gifts of stock prior to 1997.

● (0850)

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: The $176 million is since when?

Mr. Donald Johnson: That's since 1997. In 1997, when Paul Martin was the finance minister, they cut the capital gains tax in half on gifts of stock. In 2006, the rest of the capital gains tax was removed on gifts of stock.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: That $176 million is from 1996 to the present?

Mr. Donald Johnson: Yes. It's from 1997 to the present time, to 2016.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Okay. That's a lot of money.

As you know, we talk a lot about how governments can transfer wealth from the affluent to the less fortunate. Your proposal would allow that transfer to happen voluntarily and efficiently by effectively taking taxation off those voluntary philanthropic contributions. Right now, if a privately owned company were to give shares or the proceeds of shares in its company to a charity, a portion of that donation would be taken away by the government and diverted away from the charity, which seems to go against the universally accepted goal of encouraging more generosity.

You mentioned in your presentation that the donations that have resulted from removing capital gains tax from gifts of publicly traded shares are incremental, that is, they are not a replacement of cash donations that would otherwise have occurred. What evidence of that can you provide us with?

Mr. Donald Johnson: I think the people who have the capacity to give typically are not sitting with tons of cash in a bank account. Their wealth has been created by either starting a company and building a company or investing in real estate. I could give examples of that.

I'm rather reluctant to talk about my own charity giving, but I've donated, in total, about $25 million to charities. It's all been in the form of stock. If I'd had to pay capital gains tax on gifts when I transferred shares to charities, I would have given a tiny fraction of those amounts in the form of cash.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Right.

In terms of those donations, maybe Mr. Barata can talk about the value of that kind of philanthropy to his organization.

Mr. Pedro Barata: I'd be happy to. I also want to echo the comments about Mr. Johnson and his incredible leadership in philanthropy. It's made a huge difference in our city and region. In fact, with regard to his many contributions, I spoke about community hubs earlier. The real leadership in terms of helping us invest and leverage government dollars through an investment in community hubs has allowed us to do very special things in neighbourhoods that really need it.

Around this measure, and to your earlier question, what's been very encouraging is that alongside the increase in stock donations, the increase in the United Way campaign has also kept pace with those donations at the same level. Today, United Way Toronto and York Region is the biggest United Way campaign in the world. We live in a very generous city. It's about a $100-million campaign. If you average out the gifts of securities over the 20 years, they represent about 8% of our total campaign every year.

So I would say that the two go hand in hand. At the same time, the gifts of securities provide a very important foundation for our campaign. The other gifts in terms of money are also quite important, allowing us to invest in a network of 200 community agencies and initiatives to help people succeed.

● (0855)

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: That would make $8 million on average in gifts of securities and then about $92 million in cash?

Mr. Pedro Barata: I'm doing just a straight calculation on $176 million over the past 20 years and what that works out to.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

MP Long, please.

Mr. Wayne Long (Saint John—Rothesay, Lib.): Thank you to our witnesses this morning. That was very interesting testimony. We always prepare questions. Just listening to you, I could basically ask you questions all day.

First off, Mr. Johnson, I just want to congratulate you for the Order of Canada you received in 2004, was it?

Mr. Donald Johnson: Yes.

Mr. Wayne Long: Congratulations for that. I didn't realize that. I'm honoured that you're here this morning.

I'll start with you, Ms. McConnell, with respect to your ideas on poverty reduction. I remember that I once got a call that my city of Saint John, New Brunswick, and Toronto were tied—with a headline in the *National Post*—but tied unfortunately for the lead in LI measurement and child poverty in Canada. It was a distinction for which neither of us wanted to be at the top of the list.

When you look at things like the different initiatives you've had—Breaking the Cycle in 2009 and 2013, Realizing our Potential in 2014 and 2018, and now TO Prosperity—it seems as though cities and provinces have all kinds of different initiatives, but what's disappointing is that the needle hasn't moved. It's not for a lack of trying. I just want you to comment on how important it is to have an alignment of the three levels of government in coming up with a national poverty reduction strategy.

Mrs. Pamela McConnell: I would say it's essential. I don't think it works unless we're all collaborating together. We do yearly targets of initiatives in a work plan. We have 76 initiatives this year. I would say that approximately a quarter of them are in collaboration with other orders of government or with community organizations, such as you've heard today, and trades and business people—particularly business people, surprisingly, on Bay Street, who are employing 100 young people every year. We're in the fifth year. It was just a person who decided to do that.

If you don't have that kind of collaboration, you can't get through those lists and you certainly can't fund them. All of those lists this year are in the budget.

Mr. Wayne Long: Are you able to give me an example of how misalignment, if you will, has hurt the City of Toronto?

Mrs. Pamela McConnell: I am able to give you one of how it helped—

Mr. Wayne Long: Okay, that's fine.

Mrs. Pamela McConnell: —and that would be with child nutrition. The province, the private sector, the City of Toronto, and the school boards have come together, and we have several hundred thousand children who are now being fed. We've upped the percentage not only of the children but also of the contribution. That's an example.

An example where it's not working at the moment, I would say, is in the housing field, where we have the open-door policy, which allows for taxation as well as a donation of surplus lands from our city. We have not seen that from the federal government yet.

The final one is one I underscored, which is our social housing. In Ontario it's very different, if I may say so, from that across the country. We are the only ones who have to deal with affordable housing on the tax base of the property, so it's a bit different. This is the problem right across Ontario. It's not unique to Toronto, even though we have a third of it.

Those are a couple of examples.

Mr. Wayne Long: Thank you very much.

Ms. Barrera and Ms. Todorow, in Saint John—Rothesay, my office does a lot of work with the homeless and shelters. We deal with Outflow, which is the homeless shelter for men. Can you give me some ideas as to what more we can do from a federal perspective to help the shelters and those who are homeless?

Ms. Mary Todorow: We don't have a lot of expertise with shelters. Our advocacy is more on the permanent side.

● (0900)

Mr. Wayne Long: Okay.

Ms. Mary Todorow: Shelters are just an interim measure. We think the housing first is really the way to go with folks in the housing shelters.

Most people actually don't remain in the shelter. It's the chronic residents there you want to target with the housing first program. What you need, definitely, are supports. You need a good system of supports to keep those people housed.

It's not always successful. It's working very well—the outcome of the pilot project—and that's why a lot of money is being invested in housing first.

I know that in Toronto—and maybe Councillor McConnell can talk about this—we have overcrowding in the shelters. I think a lot of that is because we don't have permanent affordable housing with supports for people who, generally, have a lot of other issues that keep them unhoused and on the streets.

Mr. Wayne Long: Thank you very much.

Mr. Bach, in your presentation you talked about extending social infrastructure to families. Can you elaborate on what you meant by that?

The Chair: Keep it very short, please.

Mr. Michael Bach: We have a kind of residual approach to broader social support. It relies on the family to be the lead. We have a growing number of families who, themselves, are caregivers. They can't provide the backup support, and they are burning out. We have a hugely disproportionate number of kids with disabilities in child welfare, etc.

Our approach to this is community-based support systems that provide backup to family caregivers. We need to provide support to families themselves to connect and to develop their own leadership in their own communities to drive change. We need respite systems that provide families with backup respite. We need families to have access to navigators in order to navigate the community.

I think there is a clear role for the federal government in supporting the key infrastructure that enables families to connect and provides those navigation systems. It's not just a social service. If families are going to be the social infrastructure that we increasingly rely on them to be, we need the federal government to invest in the capacity of communities to enable families to play that role. It's not a social service. It's a piece of social infrastructure. With regard to that piece that supports families being the caregivers and leaders in their communities around this issue, I think there's a really legitimate role for the federal government to play, and we have lots of models for that.

The Chair: Thank you.

Now we go to MP Sansoucy.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Brigitte Sansoucy (Saint-Hyacinthe—Bagot, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I want to thank all the witnesses for contributing to our study.

More specifically, I want to thank Mr. Bach for insisting that we must first establish a clear definition of poverty. Surprisingly, the federal government and all its departments haven't reached an agreement on a definition of poverty in Canada. In our committee's report, this type of definition must be the basis of any strategy and objective concerning poverty.

My first questions are for the Advocacy Centre for Tenants Ontario representative. You think the housing first program is “the” solution. We know that it helps very vulnerable people who already live in the street. However, local organizations that currently work on prevention were hit with budget cuts when it was decided that, in the major cities, 60% of the homelessness partnering strategy budget would be invested in the housing first approach.

You may know that, in Quebec, there has been a call for a long time to let the people who work in the field and who know the conditions and possible solutions choose the approach to use. The CMHC is looking at the possibility of letting the people involved choose either a broader approach or the housing first approach, according to needs in the field.

I want to know your opinion. Should we let the organizations or communities choose either a housing first approach or a broader approach?

● (0905)

[*English*]

Ms. Mary Todorow: I would say that here in Ontario, our 47 municipal service managers have put together 10-year housing and homelessness plans. They've done extensive studies, research, and community consultations in terms of what the needs are in our community and how we need to address them over 10 years.

Yes, I think that the local communities are best placed at this time. We're really looking forward to the results of these plans, which are being monitored by the Ministry of Housing. They look at what the needs are in the community, and they set goals and targets. They've done a lot of groundwork. I would say, yes, it's happening at the local level, but it can't happen at the local level—as Pam McConnell, Councillor of the City of Toronto said—without co-operation and funding from the other levels of government, both here in Ontario with the provincial government, and with the federal government.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Brigitte Sansoucy: Thank you.

I'll move on to another subject.

We're currently talking about social housing because agreements are ending and the housing affected by these agreements will be rented to people who can afford to not rely on Quebec's rent supplement.

You pointed out that the waiting lists are long and that, as a result, it's important to build social housing. How should the federal government respond in relation to these agreements that are ending?

[*English*]

Ms. Mary Todorow: We consider that a huge homelessness prevention initiative, because what we could potentially have is hundreds of thousands of households not being able to afford their rent. I know that the federal government has done an interim funding arrangement. They intend to find a long-term solution to this, which we think is absolutely crucial. I actually used to live in a federally funded housing co-op under a federal program. A quarter of our units were subsidized. A lot of those people got their lives together, went on, and didn't need to live in a subsidized unit, and somebody else who did came in.

When I think that today the co-op wouldn't be able to provide a housing charge to those folks so that they could have money for all the other basic necessities in life and get on with getting out of poverty, I find that astounding. There has to be a fix, and it has to involve money.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Brigitte Sansoucy: Thank you.

My next question is for Ms. McConnell.

You rightly pointed out that the different levels of government must work together. My colleague, Marjolaine Boutin-Sweet, the member for Hochelaga, is our housing critic. She proposed that municipalities should be allowed to expand their taxation power by implementing a tax on construction materials or a tax of this nature. This would help reduce construction costs and building maintenance costs.

Ms. Boutin-Sweet proposed that a national housing strategy should have three criteria. First, it should be flexible, so that the communities can establish themselves the frameworks they want to put forward. Then, the communities should be given the financial means to do so. Lastly, the strategy must be based on a partnership between the groups in the field and the different levels of government.

Are these three criteria essential? I'm asking you this question because I find it relates to different parts of your presentation.

[*English*]

The Chair: I'm afraid we're past the time, but I'm going to give you about 30 seconds to answer that.

Mrs. Pamela McConnell: Yes, that is essential. In addition to the taxation that would come to us, there is taxation that the federal government could do—most importantly, remortgaging to get the mortgage prices down.

I think that working with the community, particularly the non-profit and co-op sectors, has been hugely important here. When I was president of that organization, we were opening one co-op a month, and I don't think we've opened one in 10 years.

● (0910)

The Chair: Thank you.

MP Sangha, please.

Mr. Ramesh Sangha (Brampton Centre, Lib.): Thank you very much to all our witnesses for coming here and providing very valuable input.

My question is for you, Mr. Barata. You talked about five types of steps that you suggest the committee take. I'm not very clear regarding the steps. Could you please explain to the committee what you mean by “community infrastructure”?

Mr. Pedro Barata: Right now when we think about the government's investments in infrastructure, we tend to think about the deficits we have around bridges, sewers, and other kinds of hard infrastructure. What we're suggesting is that we also think about that infrastructure from a social point of view.

Community hubs are essentially community centres where agencies and various programs can come together and, in a one-stop shop format, provide opportunities for people to come in and get help with child care, employment services, and primary health care, with all of those under one roof. Building these requires an investment. We believe that investment is just as important as an investment in bridges, sewers, and other hard infrastructure, because what you're doing is essentially building a way to provide people with direct services and opportunities.

The other one is around community benefits. If the federal government is going to invest a dollar in terms of building these very same things, it could also think about how we can get this dollar to be spun to provide opportunities for those who are furthest from the labour market. We know that in the trades and in construction there is going to be a high demand—and a growing high demand—for building all the things that we need to build. There are really two approaches to this. We can continue to import foreign-trained professionals and to do temporary foreign worker programs to fill labour force needs, or we can look at the population that's sitting right in our back yard and is not being maximized, and at how it is that we engage in partnerships to give those people opportunities.

Mr. Ramesh Sangha: In your school of thought, as you are telling us about here, is there a possibility that you can amalgamate this with Mr. Bach's ideas?

Mr. Pedro Barata: Absolutely, yes. In fact, one of the projects we're engaged in right now is the building of the Eglinton Crosstown in partnership with Metrolinx, the Government of Ontario, and the City of Toronto, not only to do construction trades, but to do professional administrative and technical jobs, as well as leverage social procurement. Metrolinx and its partners are going to be spending a lot of money on photocopying, couriers, and all kinds of different business needs, and we have a target of making sure that social enterprises, many of which employ people with intellectual disabilities, will have an opportunity to have them perform some of those jobs, get a foothold in the labour market, and belong to their community.

Mr. Ramesh Sangha: Mr. Bach, could what Mr. Barata was talking about in terms of social and family connection be amalgamated into this system?

Mr. Michael Bach: Absolutely. I mean, families need a place to go in their communities for resources, backup support, and assistance to help them navigate their communities. They're working across health, social services, and various benefit programs. They're falling through the cracks, and because they're falling through the cracks their kids are ending up in child welfare or in long-term care. The idea of community hubs as places that provide support for social enterprise and places for families to gather and to develop initiatives to provide them social support is the piece that's missing. It's not about delivering services directly but about giving a place in the community where people can gather to come up with creative solutions in their local communities.

We need locally responsive strategies, and we need the federal government to have a relationship with local communities. While transfers to provinces, whether for housing or health care or home care, are all important, we need a direct relationship between the federal government and local communities to help them come up with locally based, community-based solutions.

● (0915)

Mr. Ramesh Sangha: Thank you.

To Ms. Barrera or Ms. Todorow, you talked about housing first and you talked about tenants with regard to rent-geared-to-income and affordable housing. Do you believe this has directly affected the housing situation, and what valuable ideas would your organization suggest to the committee regarding affordable housing? I know you talked about housing first. What would you suggest there?

Ms. Mary Todorow: We're not opposed to housing first. We're saying that it is serving just a portion of the need out there. A lot of people who are not on the street or not in shelters also need housing. There are people who are paying far too much of their income on their rent. There's a gap there between what they pay and what they can afford to pay. CMHC says it should not be more than 30% of our total household income. If we get up to 50%, we're at dire risk of losing our housing. For sure housing first is part of the tool box of addressing our housing affordability and homelessness crisis in Canada, but it's not the only one.

In terms of what we particularly focus on with regard to homelessness prevention, for example, our clinic runs a tenant duty counsel program in Ontario. We provide summary advice and sometimes representation to tenants who are mostly at the landlord and tenant board because they're facing eviction for arrears. In many cases, the only thing we can do is maybe negotiate for a repayment plan if the housing may be sustainable. Maybe there's a short-term financial gap, etc. In most cases, it's just not going to work. There's just not enough money to be able to pay for all their basic needs. This is why a housing benefit might be an appropriate approach, but we don't think that alone is the solution. We'd rather have that housing benefit tied to new construction of rental housing so that people can actually afford to go into the homes.

The affordable housing that's being built under the investment in affordable housing program is not affordable to the people on the waiting list who are homeless unless an additional rental subsidy is available. We're talking about the most vulnerable people in our communities here. People who are eligible for those investment in affordable housing rents have to make about $40,00 a year. As an example, half of the tenants in TCHC have incomes of less than $15,000 a year. The majority of the tenants in TCHC are recipients of social assistance.

Do you know what's really scary? The majority of people who are on Ontario Works are living in the private rental sector. Their shelter allowance component of social assistance is not enough to pay for average rents in virtually every community across Ontario.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Long, go ahead, please.

Mr. Wayne Long: Mr. Bach, in Saint John we're proposing a social enterprise pilot whereby we work with the food banks, and the food banks bring in people with disabilities, who take training and warehouse training and learn inventory control. It's win-win, because obviously, the food banks can get some support, and we're helping those people. In the past, we've interviewed witnesses like Mark Wafer from Tim Hortons and Randy Lewis from Walgreens, who are wonderful examples of people who have broken down those barriers.

Again, we're here to come up with federal initiatives whereby we can help with a national poverty reduction strategy. I go back to you: from a federal government perspective, how can we help break down those barriers? How can we help employers? Mark Wafer and Randy Lewis both have children with disabilities, and I think Mark himself is hearing impaired. I'm looking for your ideas as to what programs, what things we can do to really help those people.

Mr. Michael Bach: One very successful example in the employment area, which relates to social infrastructure, is an initiative we're undertaking, with federal government support, in partnership with the Canadian Autism Spectrum Disorders Association, so for people with autism. We identified 20 communities across the country where the piece of infrastructure that's missing is the bridge between employers—the demand side—and the supply of labour. So much of the federal role, when it comes to employment, has focused on the supply side—another training program, a provincial government fund, employment support programs, all of which are fine. The problem is there's a mismatch between the employers, who are looking for people, and the diversity strategies to hire people with disabilities and people in the community where they are. This initiative, called Ready, Willing and Able, built the bridge. It's the social infrastructure between employers and employment support agencies. This initiative gets people with disabilities hired. We go to employers to generate, work on, and help them execute their demand, and then we link up supply in the community. In less than three years, we've had 2,000 hires. The cost per job for the federal government is half of any other federal disability employment program.

This is what I mean by “missing pieces”. We need the federal government to finance that infrastructure, because, as we get employers in local communities that are interested in hiring people because of this demand-side strategy, they say, “Well, you know, we have our national employer.” We now have almost 10 national employers. Costco is part of this, and because we're able to work on the employer's side, they're hiring in communities across the country. If that had been divided up among 13 provincial-territorial strategies, it wouldn't have worked. You need the link between local communities that feed into national infrastructure so you share lessons and you share information laterally. You'd need a massive federal and interprovincial conference to try to design this. Rely on communities to link up, share best practices, and build the infrastructure they need across the country. The example of local community hubs is ideal.

● (0920)

Mr. Wayne Long: Yes, we have one in Saint John.

Mr. Michael Bach: How are we going to link up local community hubs across the country to share a best practices model?

Mr. Wayne Long: I want to stay with you, if you don't mind. When Mr. Sangha was interviewing you, you said the federal government needs closer direct relationships with local communities. I think that's something that's a prevailing theme through our whole study. For me in Saint John, when I was a rookie MP I had all these great ideas, and then I found out that a lot of that federal money would go to the province, and from the province I didn't have a lot of control over where it went. How do you see that working? How do you see the federal government directly syncing and linking with local communities, municipalities, and towns?

Mr. Michael Bach: You'd have to redefine your relationship with the national non-profit sector, which has been underfunded and is facing incredibly difficult challenges. There is infrastructure that makes that work. We have an initiative, for instance, that touches down in Saint John, among immigrant refugee families, people with intellectual disabilities, and women with mental health issues, to address violence prevention. It's a huge issue. We've been able, through our linkages with other national non-profits supported through Status of Women Canada, to create these spaces where we have first nations and aboriginal women, immigrant and refugee women, and women with intellectual and mental health issues to come up with innovative strategies to address violence prevention in Saint John linked with other communities across the country.

Mr. Wayne Long: Ms. McConnell, you talked about priorities and the focus being housing, transit, and child care. It's important that we get upstream of poverty. Can you briefly touch on how important a national early learning program would be to get upstream? As governments, at times we give bandaids. We don't get upstream. Can you quickly comment on early learning?

The Chair: He hasn't left you a lot of time, I'm afraid. Give a very brief answer, please.

Mrs. Pamela McConnell: It's one of the biggest issues. I would say that essential to growing a healthy population is to have children who learn at the same level so they can deal with their peers and be contributing, as children, all the way through. That means that you have to have decent, affordable child care from the very beginning. I just remind you that in Sweden, the day you give birth you can find out where your daycare is, and if you're in Quebec, you actually get a decent cost for that.

We have 4,000 empty spaces in Toronto. We have spaces, but we have nobody who can afford them, because they're too much for people who don't get subsidies, and we don't have enough subsidies. That's how you could help us.

● (0925)

The Chair: Thank you so much.

For the final word, we'll go to Mr. Brassard.

Mr. John Brassard (Barrie—Innisfil, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

One of the issues in dealing with a poverty reduction strategy is to think to the future. From my standpoint, anyway, I see a looming crisis. It's the elephant in the room that people mention but don't really want to talk about, and that's the level of household debt in this country right now. We're looking at about $1.70 for every dollar that's taken in.

A lot of what we're dealing with, from what I sense through this committee's work and some of the research I've done, are the needs of the present. How are we dealing with the needs of the future, given the circumstances that exist? There are a lot of people in precarious positions right now financially. If interest rates go up, they're going to be in significantly precarious positions.

Mr. Barata, you spoke about the child tax benefit. Nanos Research recently did a poll and found that only 15% of the child tax benefit will go towards spending, and 85% will go towards paying household debt, so the idea that somehow this is going to lift people out of poverty perhaps is a little jaded.

I'd like to go across the panel. I only have four minutes or less now, but how do we deal with the looming crisis?

Mr. Michael Bach: I'll give a couple of very practical proposals. The federal government, under the previous government, introduced the registered disability savings plan to provide future economic security for people with significant disabilities. There are so many who aren't going to be able to tap that. What we're proposing is that the federal government allow people to actually use that as an asset to get into the housing market. There are people who actually have assets. It could build security for some of the most vulnerable people. It's a great instrument, but for many people with disabilities, they're going to pass, and the asset is going to go on to their families.

Mr. Pedro Barata: I'd like to do a plug for Prosper Canada. I think financial inclusion and financial literacy is a core component of really helping to empower families with the tools they need to, first of all, access all the programs and benefits that are available through the tax system and otherwise. It's also important to equip them with tools for financial planning and with access to financial tools. Normally, these are products marketed to middle- and upper-income families. Those have to be more targeted to lower-income families. I think there are very cost-effective ways that leverage community partnerships that can help families get ahead.

Mr. Donald Johnson: I'll give one example, and that is a greater share of donations to organizations such as JA Canada, junior achievement, which provides classes for students, giving them an education in financial literacy so they understand that keeping their financial situation in order is very helpful. I think our proposal on stimulating more charitable giving would be helpful to address that issue.

Mrs. Pamela McConnell: We haven't talked much about free transit. I think it's a major piece of what families spend their money on. I would take your federal transit tax and move it into an opportunity for an accessible fare. It is going to be costly. In our city, it's $46 million. That would be very helpful for a lot of people, along with it being free for children on transit, which we've done.

Ms. Mary Todorow: Well, the clientele we deal with are living in poverty, and those folks don't usually get loans to buy a house.

I've been following this just personally, this whole idea of people being in debt, and I know that a lot of it in Toronto is driven by the high housing prices and people being over-leveraged. If interest rates were to go up by 2% or 3%, people might have to walk away from homes. Those people will be looking for rental housing and there's not enough of it.

● (0930)

Mr. John Brassard: Thank you.

Mr. Johnson, the numbers you gave with respect to the capital gains were astounding. You spoke specifically about the United Way benefit. Can you give me examples of other organizations that have benefited from this charitable donations situation?

Mr. Donald Johnson: I think all areas of the charitable sector have benefited, primarily health care, education, social services, hospitals, universities, colleges, arts and culture organizations, social service agencies like United Way, and religious organizations.

Mr. John Brassard: It's been broadly supported, then, across the board.

Mr. Donald Johnson: Yes.

Mr. John Brassard: Ms. McConnell, you briefly mentioned the mayor's "open door" program. Can you give us an example? Development charges, for example—

Mrs. Pamela McConnell: Yes. There would be hookup charges, development charges, and sometimes tax abatement for a while. That's raised about $106 million, and it's targeted for 1,750 rental units and 641 home ownerships. You can see that we're able to deliver on actual homes as a result of some of those taxation incentives.

It encourages us to use our own land but with developers to work with us in partnership. That has been very successful. Regent Park, which I represent, is perhaps the most successful redevelopment of public land in Canada and maybe in the world. It's quite remarkable.

The Chair: Thank you very much, everybody. This has been very enlightening. I'm very glad that we rescheduled and did get back here. I want to thank all of you for spending some time with us this morning.

Committee members, we will be breaking for a few moments and reconvening at 9:45 sharp.

● (0930)

(Pause)

● (0950)

The Chair: Good morning. Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2) and the motion adopted by the committee on Monday, June 13, 2016, the committee is resuming its study on poverty reduction strategies.

This is it. This is the last of the witness testimony that we'll be hearing. This has been a long study.

I thank you for being here. I know that we had to reschedule many of you as a result of our being stuck in Saint John, New Brunswick, thanks to Wayne Long.

Mr. Wayne Long: It wasn't that bad.

The Chair: Yes, it wasn't that bad because you were at home.

Welcome to everyone.

From the City of London, we have Sandra Datars Bere, managing director of housing, social services, and Dearness Home. Welcome. I went to high school in London.

From Parkdale Activity-Recreation Centre we have Victor Willis, executive director. From the Social Planning and Research Council of Hamilton we have Deirdre Pike, senior social planner, and Alana Baltzar, volunteer for the Hamilton organizing for poverty elimination project. From Good Shepherd, we have Alan Whittle, director of community relations and planning.

Welcome to all of you. We have a full panel and lots of questions for all of you. We'll keep the introductory comments to seven minutes. If you see this light go on, that's my very not-so-subtle way of saying that time is up. This will be during the introduction as well as during the questions. We have simultaneous interpretation available if needed.

We'll get started right away with Sandra Datars Bere from the City of London.

Ms. Sandra Datars Bere (Managing Director, Housing, Social Services, and Dearness Home, City of London): Thank you so much.

Bonjour, and thank you, Mr. Chair, vice-chairs, and members of the House of Commons standing committee. I'm appreciative of the opportunity to participate on this panel and to contribute to your discussions on poverty reduction.

As you know, my name is Sandra Datars Bere, and I am the managing director of Housing, Social Services, and the Dearness Home, which is a long-term care facility in the City of London. Today I want to share with you an important community process that occurred in London over the last year, which led to “London for All: A Roadmap to End Poverty”. I believe this is an innovative community approach to the reduction of poverty, one that directly involves those directly affected by poverty.

With more than 62,000 Londoners living in poverty, London's poverty rates are higher than both the national and the provincial averages. Child and youth poverty rates in London have also increased significantly. In 2015, one in four children born in London was living in poverty. Since 2006, the number of Londoners receiving social assistance has increased by 10,000 people. There are two particularly vulnerable groups living in poverty, those being 24% of our children and about 41% of our indigenous people.

These figures were obviously distressing. As a result, our mayor, Matt Brown, convened an advisory panel on poverty in September 2015 with a six-month mandate—very quick—to develop a set of action-oriented recommendations on how as a community in London we can address issues related to poverty more effectively. The recommendations in this report are built on the foundation of the panel's approach, which was rooted in the social determinants of health, the best available research, the good work already happening in London, and deep engagement with over 1,000 Londoners.

The panel sought to bring London residents together to develop a deeper understanding of the community-wide impacts of poverty and the opportunities for change. Panel members attended nearly 100 meetings and heard from over 1,000 Londoners—most notably, Londoners living in poverty. The panel used multiple methods to engage Londoners, including those with lived experience, through large community conversations, online surveys, conversations hosted by community partners, and formal delegations to the panel. The goal of the 112 recommendations in this document is for London to reach its potential by ending poverty in one generation.

I'd like to highlight the shared understanding of poverty that was developed by the community.

Poverty is a community issue. Poverty impacts all of us because a community experiences poverty and cannot reach its potential when people lack or are denied the economic, social, or cultural resources to participate fully.

Poverty is an equity issue. Poverty impacts everyone, but impacts people differently and for different reasons, including discrimination, racism, and sexism.

Poverty is a human rights issue. The call for universal human rights compels us, legally and morally, to ensure an equitable and inclusive society that provides enough for all.

As well, poverty is an economic sustainability issue. At the community level, poverty has economic impacts, because individuals and families living in poverty are less likely to work and more likely to draw on emergency and social services.

The recommendations in “London for All” are centred around eight areas: changing mindsets, income and employment, health, homelessness prevention and housing, transportation, early learning and education, food security, and system change. The success of the implementation of these recommendations requires the support of the entire community. This support will be organized through an implementation body, which will carry the conversation forward by bringing partners together, developing and overseeing implementation plans, and ensuring ongoing evaluation of and accountability for the work.

The key to this approach is that each working group tied to the implementation of the plan will be composed of a minimum of one third of Londoners who know poverty at a personal level. Londoners with lived experience will be included as key decision-makers at each level in the implementation body. The implementation will be coordinated by a person with expertise from a community organization and another with lived experience.

I'm going to spend a few more minutes as I conclude my comments on some feedback as outlined for the standing committee. It reflects the work you're doing as part of your study and some feedback we'd like to give to you.

The housing recommendations in “London for All” include building a “culture of practice” around implementation of a housing first approach; engaging landlords in keeping people housed; investing in “housing allowances to support flexible, permanent housing stability for individuals and families”; and implementing strategies to “assist in housing women at risk of or experiencing homelessness”.

● (0955)

In terms of employment, “London for All” recommends that London become a basic income guarantee pilot site. The city staff engaged the community in consultations on this subject, and the results have been presented to the province. The plan also suggests the community build on existing work to accelerate skills training programs and meet local market needs.

Transportation to Londoners to allow Londoners to reach their jobs, attend their appointments, and access child care also emerged as a key theme. Reducing transit-related costs for people with low incomes and allowing children under 12 to ride public transit free of charge were among the recommendations.

I'm happy to say that in December of 2016 our municipal council supported this recommendation, and as of January 1, 2017, all children 12 years of age and under now ride public transit for free. In addition, council supported providing a subsidized bus pass for Londoners living on low incomes. This will begin in January of the new year.

“London for All” also recommended the creation of a coordinated local mental health and addictions strategy that is health-based, evidence-informed, and, I stress again, developed by community members with lived experience. This recommendation has also been supported by London's municipal council.

Today, more than ever before, we have a better understanding of the causes and impacts of poverty. The provincial and federal governments have begun to focus more and more on the issues involving poverty, and what is more, they recognize the important roles municipalities play in the everyday lives of their constituents.

While poverty affects individuals, it is not merely an individual problem. We all pay the price, both in real dollar costs to health care and social services and in the emotional and spiritual burden that the existence of poverty places upon us. A great city and a great country are those that include everyone—rich and poor, young and old, newcomers and long-time residents. It is a city and a country in which all of us have a true sense of ownership and belonging and in which all citizens come together towards a common goal.

It is only by working together that we more effectively address how we will fill gaps, remove barriers, and help to end the cycle of poverty for future generations of Canadians.

Thank you.

● (1000)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

From Parkdale Activity-Recreation Centre, we have now Mr. Willis, the executive director.

Mr. Victor Willis (Executive Director, Parkdale Activity-Recreation Centre): Good morning, and thank you to the chair and the members of the committee for the opportunity to present to you today.

My comments and observations about the effects of poverty on people with mental health histories are based on my personal and professional experience.

Lack of adequate income is a predominantly isolating experience for many people with severe mental health histories. Too often, debilitation due to symptoms and/or treatment is exacerbated by poverty, so much so that what is thought of as an invisible disability is all too apparent due to the obvious and discernible effect of being extremely poor.

I've experienced three generations of mental health trauma in my life. My mother was diagnosed with schizophrenia at 22 and was treated until she died at the age of 67. My 50-year-old brother has struggled most of his life without a diagnosis or treatment and is currently living in poverty on the street. My son had a first episode prior to starting university, went on to complete a degree, and is now living independently and working.

As the executive director of PARC since 1999, I've seen first-hand the effects of poverty on many hundreds of adults with mental health histories. PARC is a community-based mental health agency that provides supportive housing, individualized support, also known as intensive case management, employment support, and social recreational activities that reduce isolation. I've also seen the remarkable effect of recovering from lifelong trauma, stigma, and discrimination through meaningful activity, social connection, employment, and most fundamentally, safe, supportive housing.

When I arrived in 1999, PARC employed about 15 full-time equivalent positions, four being people with lived experience. Today PARC employs almost 100 people, with more than two-thirds being people with lived experience.

There are two distinct paths for individuals with mental health histories: affordably and safely housed, or not. As Canadians, I believe we want people to recover, live meaningful lives, and participate in society and the economy. We have legislation that enshrines accommodating people with disabilities, yet as my colleague Lana Frado, the executive director of Sound Times support services, queries, “What does the ramp for mental health look like?” I suggest that the ramp restores hope and dignity for individuals with mental health histories.

The intersection of mental health disability and poverty has many nuances. Ontario has a social assistance system that provides income assistance with two clear activities: an allowance to cover the costs of living independently, and access to prescriptions to support independence. Within the income support is an allowance for shelter. The Ontario shelter allocation is $479, which in many municipalities is completely insufficient to secure safe, affordable housing. At PARC, all the people we support living in private-market housing are using 90% of their monthly income to pay for rent. Even then, a person late with a payment is often evicted and is then put at the mercy of an impossibly scarce private affordable housing market.

What about affordable or supportive housing? Currently the affordable housing wait-list is seven to 10 years. The wait-list for Toronto supportive housing is four to five years.

The fear or threat of becoming homeless creates a climate of feeling trapped in less-than-accommodating housing, from an accessibility perspective, due to the nature of private-market affordable housing, which may not be well maintained or safe. There are many hundreds of cases across the city where buildings have long backlogs for major repairs, including heating, elevators, water pressure, holes, and pests. At the same time, the limited choice of privately affordable rental housing means living somewhere that may not have easy access to services such as health care, food, recreation, and employment opportunities, which then means requiring money to purchase transit.

In Toronto, the cost of a monthly Metropass is $147, or $3 for a one-way trip. Of course, this presumes that you have enough income left to purchase transit after food, a telephone line, or a cell phone.

It is the correlation of these circumstances that causes harm and that fits quite clearly within the realm of the poverty gap experienced by individuals and families with mental health histories.

What's the answer? I know that the answer is a core and foundational commitment to affordable and supportive housing so that individuals can experience stability in their housing as a recovery point for further gains in social and economic opportunities.

● (1005)

I have a case in point. Terry arrived at PARC's doors in 1992, homeless and exhibiting signs of a major mental health crisis. He began attending our drop-in and engaging in social activities. A worker found him supportive housing. He started to volunteer at PARC. Subsequently, he applied for a training opportunity that provided compensation in the form of honoraria, which built his confidence and mitigated his poverty while reinforcing his skills. He then applied for a part-time employment posting, and then became a full-time, unionized employee. Last year he moved out of his small, affordable bachelor apartment into a large, private-market one-bedroom that provides him with room for his dog and cats.

A year ago the provincial Mental Health and Addictions Leadership Advisory Council set a minimum target of 30,000 units of supportive housing. Disability income frameworks must not enshrine the right to not have enough to live on.

Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Willis.

We're going to move to the Social Planning and Research Council of Hamilton.

Deirdre Pike and Alana Baltzar, the next seven minutes are yours.

Ms. Deirdre Pike (Senior Social Planner, Social Planning and Research Council of Hamilton): Thank you, Chair and members of this committee, for the opportunity to present to you today some ideas and recommendations for your consideration as you conduct this national study on poverty reduction strategies. It's our hope that this will inform the national strategy on poverty reduction that this country so greatly needs and that this government certainly seems to be so greatly committed to.

I know you've already heard from some of our partners in Hamilton. Laura Cattari was here from the Hamilton Roundtable for Poverty Reduction. Shortly you'll hear from another great partner, Alan Whittle from the largest social service agency in Hamilton, Good Shepherd. In Hamilton we've known for decades the importance of collaborating with partners when it comes to getting meaningful results in reducing poverty. The Social Planning and Research Council, or the SPRC, where I've worked for 15 years on poverty reduction initiatives—15 of the 50 years that we've existed in Hamilton, in fact—has always been committed to getting the broadest range of stakeholders at the table in order to address these complex or wicked social issues in our community.

This is where I think I can make our first recommendation to you. An essential element of any successful poverty reduction strategy will be to work collaboratively across all sectors, with unsuspecting partners. My colleague Sandra didn't mention that in London, the Sisters of St. Joseph are among the key partners in their poverty reduction strategy. To me, they are one example of some of the unsuspecting partners we don't always have at the table.

When it comes to addressing poverty, one of the first voices that must be at every table, as you've heard, is that of lived experience. While social planners and other professionals are called the experts in this area, that is not the case. We know it's truly the first voice of lived experience that's most needed to reform our policies and practices when it comes to poverty reduction. Listening deeply to those voices can build the empathy those of us without the lived experience need in order to bring about that response to people with dignity and humanity, despite their low-income reality.

Here's an opportunity to make a second recommendation, which is to ensure that any poverty reduction efforts are informed by first-voice experience. To that end, I introduce to you Alana Baltzar. She is the co-chair of HOPE, that's Hamilton organizing for poverty elimination. She edits a newspaper in her local neighbourhood. She is a graduate of a private college. She has not done well by that, so there's another recommendation to consider, around education in these private colleges. Alana is here to offer you the benefit of her insight.

Ms. Alana Baltzar (Volunteer, Hamilton Organizing for Poverty Elimination, Social Planning and Research Council of Hamilton): Hi. I'm Alana.

I want to start this off with morning routines. We all have one, whether it's drinking coffee or tea, a shower, etc. Most people can take that for granted. It's a nice experience. My experience in the morning is waking up, putting coffee on my coffee table, turning away, and not even 30 seconds later seeing a cockroach swimming in my coffee, which causes a physical reaction at the end of that. That is an example of what it's like to live in poverty and in housing that is affordable but not necessarily the cleanest when it comes to bugs.

I grew up in poverty in Hamilton. My mom was on welfare. I'm on ODSP for mental health, and honestly, I would list all the diagnoses I've been given, but we don't have enough time to list them.

I would also like to mention that on the private colleges, I have to agree. I spent $14,000 to get a diploma that is literally useless to me. The paper is worth more than the diploma I was given. I can't get a job at all with that diploma. No one will recognize a private college diploma. Again, that strikes those in poverty, because those schools target those who are in poverty. They say things like “come to us”, “we can get you OSAP”, and “we can get you a job”. One recommendation I would have for that is to check into the success rates of those colleges. In all honesty, you'll notice that while people do have jobs, they're not in the field they went to school for or got OSAP loans for, which they now have to pay back for a diploma that's useless.

Poverty is inexcusable. You try your best to get ahead. You can't. I go to sleep each night hungry because most of the time I don't have enough food in my cupboard. ODSP does not give me enough to live on successfully after bills, my phone.... I'm lucky if I have enough to buy a strip of bus tickets to get from point A to point B for all my volunteer work. If it weren't for my community supports for all the volunteer work I do within my community, my mental health would be a lot worse than it currently is.

We need to end poverty, because children should not be going to school each day unable to learn because their stomachs won't stop growling, and they're too embarrassed to tell the teacher that they can't concentrate because they haven't had anything to eat for three days. That's because part of that goes back to parents. If you're in poverty, your parents tell you not to tell your teachers, because when you do, that always ends up in a call to the CAS.

● (1010)

Ms. Deirdre Pike: Thank you, Alana.

I have a couple of other things that I would like to mention.

We have left with you a really great report that we have just completed in Hamilton. It's called a “social audit”. It's an opportunity we had to have 29 people with first-voice experience tell their stories to people who were deep listeners and influencers from our community, such as the Catholic bishop of Hamilton, the president of nursing at St. Joseph's Healthcare, and the head of journalism at Mohawk College. These are people who have an opportunity to listen to these stories and to do something with them in a different way. Through that opportunity, we have some very strong recommendations that I think you will appreciate, upon reflection.

One of the key things we noted, of course, was the connection between poverty and mental health. One of the recommendations was to significantly increase the investment in affordable housing with supports for people living with mental health, intellectual disabilities, and addiction and concurrent disorders. One of those examples I want to leave you with today is that of the choir we started in January. It's called “Singin' Women”. It is a choir for women at risk of or experiencing homelessness. It is essential that you apply a gender lens to this conversation. In doing so, we recognize the need for really essential supports like this.

Alana's mother and I will sing in the alto section tonight for our debut at a downtown venue in Hamilton. We're going to sing three songs. This choir is filled with about 15 women with the lived experience of homelessness who are still currently at very high risk of that and are finding life, passion, peace, and empowerment by sharing their voices in that choir. That is the kind of innovative support that I think can make huge differences, but that is not the place to land. What really needs to happen, of course, is adequate, affordable housing, and again, with the supports that are needed to obtain that.

Again, finally, I would ask you to take a look at HPS, your homelessness partnering strategy. Under that, I'm engaged as the coordinator of the Women's Housing Planning Collaborative in Hamilton. I think every community across the country needs to have a coordinator of women's homelessness that can put that gender lens on, because under the new directives of HPS, the women's homelessness system has been destabilized in a couple of ways in Hamilton. Because of the definitions, women don't often meet the specific criteria for “chronically or episodically homeless”. Therefore, housing first is leaving many of our women behind. I urge you to take a look at that as something concrete.

We have many more places that we could chat about later, but maybe we'll save that for some questions.

Thank you so much for your time.

● (1015)

The Chair: Thank you to both of you for being here and sharing some of your lived experience. Something we are trying to do in this committee is to open that up so that we are familiar. One of the reasons we are travelling is that we can actually go and see, not just hear about some of the places and some of the programs that are working. Thank you, both.

Ms. Deirdre Pike: I'll get you a ticket for the choir tonight, if you like. Brian May, from Queen...you must be pretty good at music.

The Chair: Not that I haven't heard that one before. That is now in the record, thank you very much. I often put on a very bad British accent for the telemarketers. They see it and they go, “The Brian May...?” I put on this bad British accent and say “Yes”, and then I hang up, causing all kinds of confusion.

We'll move on very quickly to Mr. Alan Whittle, director of community relations and planning at Good Shepherd.

Mr. Alan Whittle (Director, Community Relations and Planning, Good Shepherd): Thank you very much for having me this morning. It's a pleasure to present to you, and I hope my words very much complement the comments of those who have preceded me.

There are four things in particular I would like to try to address this morning and they are as follows: the provision of truly affordable housing for the long term, the importance of adequate supports for addressing homelessness, the critical role emergency shelters play in our community, and the idea that one size does not fit all.

First, I'll say a few words about the organizations I'm speaking on behalf of today. Good Shepherd works with a very diverse range of vulnerable populations through the provision of services and supports that address the needs of those who find themselves without adequate housing, food, clothing, and many other things.

In the Hamilton-Toronto area, Good Shepherd comprises three charitable organizations. In Toronto there are the Good Shepherd Ministries, and in Hamilton, there's the Good Shepherd Centre. Over both those communities, we have Good Shepherd Non-Profit Homes. I'm here today representing primarily the latter two, but I know many of my thoughts reflect those of the organization in Toronto.

Collectively, the two organizations I'm speaking on behalf of today operate some five emergency shelters in Hamilton: one for families, one for youth, one for single men, one for single women, and one for women and their children who have experienced domestic violence. As well, we offer a broad range of services, including emergency food and clothing programs, counselling, palliative care, parenting for young mothers, and personal supports for the frail and elderly. As well, we're one of the larger community mental health programs in the province.

In addition to the 392 units of affordable housing that we own and manage ourselves, we have partnerships with private sector landlords for an additional 435 units, primarily through head lease arrangements.

When I'm talking about affordable housing, I really want to make a distinction at the outset that I'm talking about that particular aspect of what I will refer to, if I may, as the Canada-Ontario affordable housing program. Part of it is about building new affordable housing. I want to focus on that first.

I think dating from the Second World War it is clear that the provision of affordable housing has generally been an afterthought. More often than not, it has been a pressure release valve for when there's been a crisis in affordability or for when our economy has been in recession and has needed a kick-start. In my opinion, the response rarely gives much thought to the long term, and as with the current program, doesn't respond to those most requiring truly affordable housing.

Let me illustrate with a few examples. In the decades that I've been developing housing, I know of no program across this country that has required that units of housing built with some form of subsidy through federal or provincial contributions must remain in perpetuity part of the affordable housing system. Some organizations like ours have this as their mandate, and they will continue to ensure that there is affordable housing, but for example, under the current program, after 20 years, in many cases, you're able to turn that affordable housing into condominiums or whatever.

Is this current program truly affordable? I think it is not, unfortunately. It does provide some really valuable housing that's slightly below market, but it does not—and I think this was pointed out earlier—really reach those most in need of housing. I think it was earlier this morning that someone from the City of Toronto was addressing the fact that so many people who are on Ontario Works or Ontario disability are basically kept out of that system unless they're able to find some other form of supports.

Are rent subsidies and housing allowances the answer? I think they are a part of the solution, because if nothing else, they provide an element of choice and flexibility to the system. However, in and of themselves, they are not sufficient. In our private sector rental units, as an example, we have for years been able to work with landlords to accommodate many of those we serve in units throughout the city who we would never have been able to house simply because we haven't built enough affordable housing.

With the current market in rental housing and the rental rates, many people are saying that even though we've had a great partnership, for decades in some cases, they're now moving to a more upscale market because they can get more revenue. As a result, we're now finding that we can no longer provide enough housing for even those people we actually have subsidies for, so we're actually losing units that we could provide market rents for with subsidies.

● (1020)

What is to be done? I think it's now time for the federal, provincial, and territorial governments to work together with municipalities and with organizations like mine, and others like it, to create a not-for-profit housing sector in this country that is largely self-sustaining. I think for far too long we've thrown a bit of money at the problem, but we really haven't thought about doing affordable housing long term. I think that should be a priority for us.

My next few points address the HPS program. Good Shepherd has operated as generally a housing first model since the early 1990s. As a result of the funding that's primarily come from the federal government—thank you—we've been able to expand our housing first service program quite extensively. However, under the current program, no funds can be used to provide health services, and the related supports are limited to a two-year period. The assumption seems to be that these supports are the responsibility of the province. Be that as it may, the problem with trying to coordinate services across a single level of government are immense, but trying to coordinate them across multiple levels of government is even tougher for an organization. We're prepared to take that challenge on. We will continue to do it, but I think when we create these programs, we really need to think about the person we're serving in the end.

I want to give an example of the impact of some of the support housing programs. In the previous fiscal year to the current one, we took 30 new tenants into our homeless program. In the prior two years before joining the program, those individuals and families collectively spent over 3,700 days in hospital in Hamilton. The rates that the hospital charges in Hamilton would exceed $5.5 million for those two years. It would be just over $2.75 million a year in psychiatric hospital stays, not to mention any other kind of service; those are just psychiatric hospital stays. Since joining the program, these same 32 individuals spent a total of 190 days in hospital, representing a cost of $285,000 annually to the system. That's a saving of approximately $2.5 million to that part of the system. This doesn't look at any of the other hospital costs or any of the police services, court system costs, food banks, and whole array of services that would normally have been involved in this.

I want to quickly move on and talk about emergency shelters. I know that certainly under the current program the emphasis is on housing first, and so it should be, but I think perhaps we have a tendency to throw the baby out with the bathwater in this particular case. Where possible, yes, we need to move people quickly into their own home, but there are many people for whom that is not a possibility, if for no other reason than there isn't enough affordable housing. We do need to have shelters in place, and we do need to make sure they're funded, particularly on the capital side. There needs to be a possibility to improve them. If you should ever have the opportunity to visit us in Hamilton, we'd gladly show you some of the great improvements we've been able to do in terms of moving it away from what was basically a working-house system, penal system, from the 19th century.

I want to wrap up by talking about how one size does not fit all. I'll give you one example of a situation with regard to a program we run at the City of Hamilton. A family was going to become homeless because their stove didn't work. The program guidelines normally wouldn't let you do something as simple as buy them a new stove so that they could stay in their home. So if we can have that kind of flexibility, whether it's dealing with gender issues, other sorts of barriers that people face, or even something as simple as replacing a stove, we can often prevent homelessness in our communities instead of making people homeless.

Thank you.

● (1025)

The Chair: Thank you very much, sir, and thank you for all the great work you're doing.

We'll move on to questions. Up first is MP Poilievre.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Thank you very much.

We have been hearing a lot from different organizations that argue that our system's social safety net is underfunded, particularly in the area of housing, which arouses a question for me. When I was first elected, the Martin government began increasing funding for housing. The Harper government then maintained that funding, and during the great global recession, we had something called the stimulus, between 2009 and 2011, which saw massive one-time infusions on top of the funding that existed. Provincially, in Ontario, we hear regularly about funding increases for housing. Municipal governments make similar announcements.

Speaking of municipal governments, their revenues have been growing at two and a half times the combined rate of inflation and population growth for roughly a decade and a half, all while two-thirds of the costs for capital projects have been uploaded to provincial and federal governments. All of this money is pouring in and growing, yet I don't hear anyone appearing before us saying, “We have enough money now. We've finally met our needs”. In fact, what I hear is the opposite. As these budgets just seem to grow at rates that vastly exceed the population and cost-of-living increases, so too do the shortages of funding.

I have a hard time understanding what's going on here, where we see vastly increasing budgets yet the need, far from diminishing, seems to grow. Does anybody have any explanation for that paradox?

Mr. Victor Willis: If I might, what's interesting is that in 1992, when Paul Martin tightened his belt, I think he actually tightened the national housing strategy from the government at the time. Subsequently, in 1995 and beyond, housing was downloaded to various provinces and then municipalities, and often the programs that were supposed to follow those social housing programs didn't follow. Toronto is a good case in point.

I think the other thing we have to keep our eye on for the people we're talking about, who are the most vulnerable.... The health accord, when it was first identified, paid 50% of the health costs. I think now it's actually down to around 21% by the feds and is predominantly picked up by the provinces. We have a real problem in how to account for and properly track money, funding, and of course, impact.

You're quite right. There is quite a bit of money being put into the system. The other part is the money that's coming out of the system and where it goes. I think we've had some examples today that some of those investments, when they were made, were very appropriate and then were pulled out of the idea of perpetuity, of affordability, and have left.

The other part of this that is really unfortunate about affordable housing is that if you create affordable housing that's at 90% of the market value, that's considered affordable, but we know that predominantly that's not affordable in most municipalities.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: You touch on the issue of fungibility, which is to say that it's hard to know where a dollar goes when it's transferred from one level of government to another. When you pour a glass of water into a swimming pool, you can't then go and take the glass and pull the same water out of that pool. It's now part of that pool. I often wonder where all these federal transfers end up.

We've been, again, massively increasing federal transfer payments now for over a decade and a half. It's true that there were some cutbacks in the 1990s, but that's two decades ago. Since the early 2000s, every single year the federal government has increased transfers to the provinces faster than the combined rate of inflation and population growth, yet the needs of provincially financed programs seems to grow and grow and grow. Every time there's a shortage, politicians from various levels of government just point at each other and say, “Oh, you know, you're not giving me enough” or “There were cuts 25 years ago, and that's the reason we don't have enough money today”.

Mr. Whittle raised an interesting point when he talked about the complexity of multi levels of government involved in the same project. Napoleon used to say that he'd rather have one incompetent general than two competent ones, because at least he'd know who was responsible for leading the troops. Do you think there's a problem with that? Are there too many levels of government involved in the same thing, and as a result of that multitude of complication, we fail to deliver the results that people in need deserve?

● (1030)

Mr. Alan Whittle: To your question, I think that can be a problem. I use the reality of trying to sometimes speak to different stakeholders. You have stakeholder A, who expects you to follow certain practices, and stakeholder B, who expects you to follow mostly similar ones, but they have their own nuances. For an organization like ours, sometimes it means having to recreate the same information, but to tell the story in a different way. You do have that kind of problem.

I'd like to just quickly go back to your earlier point in terms of the gap that's there. If you look at it—and I'm going to do it in terms of units of housing that have been built in this country in the post-Second World War era—you can see that it very clearly comes in waves. There are times when there's a fair amount, and there are times when there is perhaps nothing or next to nothing, very little.

To use Hamilton as an example, some years ago, the City of Hamilton determined that we needed to provide an average of 300 affordable housing units annually. Through much of the 1990s and the 2000s, they didn't meet any of that. They hardly built any units during that time. More recently, in perhaps the last five years, we may have built 300 units. We've managed in one five-year period to do what we needed to do in a single year.

Yes, I appreciate that more resources perhaps have been going toward this, but we've started from such a low base and a deficit that is so huge, and we're so far behind.

The Chair: Thank you.

Ramesh, please, you have six minutes.

Mr. Ramesh Sangha: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, witnesses, for coming today to give us your thoughtful ideas to help the committee.

My question is for Sandra Datars. You talked about the poverty rate among the children and about the health issues and the transportation issues end of it as they affect the children. On the 112 recommendations, I think it would be helpful if you would give that recommendations paper to the committee.

My question is on the cost of living here in the GTA and Peel, in the Golden Horseshoe region, all over. It is one that is the highest in the country and it's increasing. It's becoming more difficult for low-income individuals to cope with basic necessities. Public transportation became 30% more expensive from 2009 to 2015, and you have already said that it became free for children under the age of 12 from 2015 onward. What steps are you as an association taking to cope with these problems you are experiencing and that you have discussed today? How do you feel that they can be eliminated?

● (1035)

Ms. Sandra Datars Bere: Transportation is a huge issue even in a community like ours that has a transportation system. The transportation doesn't necessarily take people to where the jobs are. It doesn't necessarily take the children to where the schools are.

The commitment that our council has made has been for supporting money through its multi-year budget for the development of transportation for kids. Our public transit system was already providing free transit for children under five. We added $150,000. I know that it doesn't seem like a lot, but that covered the difference for kids between five and 12 years of age. Also, we've assigned an increase of about $1.2 million to our budget to look at low-income people and transportation.

One of the biggest challenges we have in our community is our ability to get around. What that keeps people from doing is accessing supports, services, food, clothing, and those kinds of things. We continue to need to make transportation.... In a community that for many people might be seen to be a “have” community, we have pockets of poverty. We have pockets of challenging realities. The growing divergence between the haves and the have-nots in our community really means that we have no choice but to put money into public transportation to support families, including children, who are part of families.

Mr. Ramesh Sangha: What steps can you suggest to the committee that the federal government should take to overcome these problems?

Ms. Sandra Datars Bere: I think we've been very supported by the federal government in the gas tax monies that have come to our transit organizations. I think there is a recognition, to go back to an earlier question, that transit isn't just about building infrastructure. It's about providing services around it, about making sure that people are aware that this is not just a bus pass; it's a bus pass to get them somewhere with supports for them when they get there.

Mr. Ramesh Sangha: Do you have any suggestions besides transportation with regard to housing?

Ms. Sandra Datars Bere: Sure. I appreciated the questions and the responses from my colleagues here at the table.

To go back to a question that the MP asked earlier, it relates to the reality of the housing starts in our communities. In our community we have a need for safe, affordable, supportive housing. There is a significant amount of housing being built in my community that is being built at the high end. They're very expensive homes and high rental-cost properties. Housing is being built in our community, and part of the challenge for municipal governments is to find the balance in supporting those in our communities who want that kind of housing, with supports and infrastructure built around that, while concurrently addressing the fact that much of the lower ends of the market in terms of rental properties are not safe, are not necessarily affordable, and are not really great or supportive places for people to live.

Moving forward, we need to look at that divide in communities. That growing divide in communities is significant.

Mr. Ramesh Sangha: What types of steps do you suggest to improve the situation regarding those who are living in poverty?

Ms. Sandra Datars Bere: At the City of London we've developed a new housing development corporation. It's a stand-alone corporation. The shareholder is the City of London, but it's an opportunity for us to work with private partners and with the not-for-profit sector to take the development of housing outside of the "rules"—I say that with the deepest respect—of developing housing within a municipal structure and to work outside of the rules that allow us to support additional development and allow us to publicly bend the rules a little bit. I probably shouldn't say that—I'm feeling like Deirdre right now—but we would do it in such a way that we address the affordability issues or the end-of-operating agreements, which was mentioned here, where we hold people to providing housing longer and not just making it into a condo when they're done with it.

Our ability to do that, with the support of our council, means that we're working with stakeholders in our communities in ways we've never done before. We'd happy to be able to share that, moving forward.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Madame Sansoucy, please.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Brigitte Sansoucy: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I want to thank the witnesses for contributing to our committee's work.

My first question is for the City of London representative.

Ontario's poverty reduction strategy refers to a basic income program. In your presentation, you said that London wanted to be part of this pilot project.

Why do you see basic income as a possible solution to poverty?

● (1040)

[*English*]

Ms. Sandra Datars Bere: In our community, as I said, many people live in poverty. A single person on Ontario Works, the support program that's run by the Province of Ontario, which we support, receives $8,000 a year. It is not sufficient. A basic income guarantee or a basic income project that the province is looking at could double that and provide additional supports for people. Part of that is about not only including an additional income piece but also supporting housing opportunities. We've talked here about the housing first piece. Once you have housing, funding support for individuals to look at other things helps them.

For the City of London, it is about an assurance, and we've looked at this, that people who live in poverty can choose their way, with supports, to rise out of poverty. The social assistance system, while I'm responsible for it in my community and I believe strongly in the support it provides, creates a reality where people make choices within a system. They don't make choices within a system that gives them money or supports them to make their own choices.

We try to do that within our system, but I will tell you that our systems are bureaucratic. I probably shouldn't say that out loud, but they are. They are bureaucratic and rules-based and driven by guidelines and the realities. A basic income allows people to take the money that they receive and use it to be supported in ways that they want to use it. It just doesn't address people who are on Ontario Works, or the Ontario disability support program. It looks at providing supports for other people, people who are providing supports for children at home, or people providing supports for elderly parents, or people who are in that sandwich generation of having to do both at the same time. The broader piece is not just around social assistance. It's about providing supports of income to people who need it and could benefit from it.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Brigitte Sansoucy: Yes, it's a matter of human dignity.

The Quebec government is looking at implementing basic guaranteed income. Several organizations, including organizations that represent persons with disabilities, are concerned that it's a way to make cuts to the current programs. The organizations are also concerned that, ultimately, it will make people poorer, since they would lose certain benefits related to the current programs.

How will basic guaranteed income be an improvement over and a supplement to the current programs and services?

[*English*]

Ms. Sandra Datars Bere: Your point about not disadvantaging people by putting them into a system is a very important point, and we've started to think about this. Part of the challenge of putting ourselves forward as being interested in the pilot, which was in 2016, is that it has led us to thinking about what the reality of that is. The reality is that income, while it will be helpful, does not necessarily address the supports that are needed to support someone to move forward, whether they have a disability, whether they are....

It was in our communities. I think Ontario, if it will implement its pilot, will need to look at how it surrounds the person with supports. I don't think you can just give people funding and expect that they will just take that and act differently. I don't mean that in a disrespectful way. I mean the reality is that supports are still needed for all of us in everything we do in our communities. Any pilot developed in the community needs to work with partners in the community, needs to be respectful of what people's needs are, and doesn't need to disadvantage people. They should not be disadvantaged. They should not lose anything through the application of a pilot.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Brigitte Sansoucy: Thank you.

My next question is for the City of Hamilton representatives.

You referred to the homelessness partnering strategy, in particular with regard to women. The current strategy allocates 60% of the budget to the housing first program. In Quebec, more and more people who work in the field think they should be able to choose the approach to use.

Should a future strategy give communities the option of favouring a broader approach or an approach such as housing first?

[*English*]

Ms. Deirdre Pike: I think the option is always a good one, and I think communities do need to have responses tailored particularly to their own experiences, yet we are seeing, particularly when you apply a gender lens to this issue.... In Hamilton, the work we've done with this exceptional innovative funding through HPS around having a coordinator to look at the system, we've been sharing with our partners in London, because they are finding the same problem there. In Waterloo and Niagara—these are all Ontario cities that are kind of close by.... We've approached Deb Matthews, who is one of our elected officials provincially, and asked if we could roll this out as a region. We've agreed there are some very significant ways and supports that women need, and we agree on those.

I don't think, in that sense, it needs to be community to community, but I do think we should ensure that each community has the opportunity to really home in on the particularities around the needs of women when it comes to homelessness. I think we can ramp that up. These pilots, like the one for the basic income, are not as useful if they aren't able to be scaled up in a way. I think this regional approach is a thing that will really move things forward and transform that. I hope that helps you understand that. It does matter.

● (1045)

The Chair: Thank you so much.

We now go over to MP Long for six minutes.

Mr. Wayne Long: Thank you, Chair.

Thank you to our witnesses.

I come from Saint John–Rothesay in southern New Brunswick. Unfortunately, we're a city of two stories of great success, but we do lead the country in child poverty, babies born addicted, violence towards females under 12, low-income single females, literacy, and obesity. We have our challenges. We're travelling the country, obviously, to come up with a national strategy to alleviate a lot of that.

Mr. Whittle, I listened with great interest to many of the things you talked about. Let's start with shelters. Our office does a breakfast program with Outflow in Saint John in which we serve breakfast to the men. I have great affinity with the shelter and the men there. From a federal government perspective, what frustrates me is that we can't get a lot of direct money to help those shelters, those people who have fallen right through the net. I'm looking for a recommendation from you as to what we can do better federally to make sure that those most vulnerable are looked after in our shelters.

Mr. Alan Whittle: Thank you for the question. I think it's a critical one, and it's obviously fraught with multi-level issues.

Ultimately, the federal government has the ability to say this is how we want to spend the money.

Mr. Wayne Long: How do you see that looking? How do you see that rolling out?

Mr. Alan Whittle: As an example, through the current HPS program, just as you did with housing first, you could simply say that this amount of it needs to go to maintain some kind of shelter system. In my mind, that would be the simplest. You could also go the direct route, and I know other people have spoken of this in the past, and go directly to the organizations by doing a proposal call in some fashion.

Mr. Wayne Long: One thing you mentioned hit home. You said that one size doesn't fit all. I think there are opportunities to work with individual communities directly, because communities know what they need and every community is different.

Another thing you talked about was a non-profit housing strategy. Can you elaborate on how you would see something like that working and being funded?

Mr. Alan Whittle: I'm not going to say I have the answer, but I know that elsewhere the advanced economy countries have come up with solutions. Unfortunately, what we have done in Canada so often is to try to address the problem with programs like limited dividend partnerships and the section 56.1 and section 95 programs. These were all great programs in their day, but now so much of that housing has just become part of the larger housing stock. It is not necessarily part of an ongoing strategy to deal with the needs of those most vulnerable in our communities. Do we take a look at that?

So many of those, especially the non-profits, have equity in their projects. Perhaps we could find a way to unleash that. Those of us who are creative would be happy to take that challenge and find a way to build more housing without asking upper levels of government for more money.

● (1050)

Mr. Wayne Long: Thank you.

Ms. Datars Bere, you listed eight pillars in your poverty reduction plan, and the last one you talked about was system change. Can you elaborate on what you mean by system change?

Ms. Sandra Datars Bere: For us in the city of London, although there are other municipalities looking at changing this, if you're in need of assistance for housing, social assistance, perhaps child care support, and food security programs, you probably have to open seven doors. I only listed three things, but you probably have to open seven doors. The reality is that as communities, we need to start looking at how we integrate that, how we put the client first, the individual first, the family first, and talk about what that means for that individual and the process that person goes through.

We talk about systems integration, putting our housing with our social assistance. Housing first is a premise we think about, so if we deal with housing first, then we can deal with the social and other child care pieces after the fact. We have many community stakeholders that are involved in supporting people outside the system, whether it's faith-based organizations or local not-for-profits. It would be helpful to have that system work in a way that people aren't going from one food bank to another food bank to another community meal.

It's around that systems piece. The system is excellent. I'm not suggesting that it's not good. It is coordinated in many ways, but people within systems who live in poverty are probably the best coordinators we have. They know exactly where to go to access the services they need. We need to start doing that too.

Mr. Wayne Long: Thank you.

I think it's apparent that we need all three levels of government aligned to effectively deliver poverty reduction strategies. Can you give me an example in London of how alignment of the levels of government has worked? Can you give me a success story?

Ms. Sandra Datars Bere: I can give you a great one. This is a recent one. We are the sixth-largest community in the province of Ontario, and we took the third-largest number of Syrian newcomers into our community. We put together a task force of 40 different agencies, stakeholders, community organizations, and three different levels of government—the province, the federal government, and the municipal government. We supported 1,600 newcomers coming into our community in less than three and a half months.

Mr. Wayne Long: Wonderful.

How does London ensure that the money spent goes to the right agencies, if you will? I know one issue in Saint John, and we've done a collaborative approach with Living Saint John, is that there was a lot of duplication. Similar agencies were all looking for the same funding, if you will. If you could wave a magic wand, you would certainly fix that.

How does London prioritize?

The Chair: Very briefly, please, Sandra.

Ms. Sandra Datars Bere: I can do it in a few words: by asking the community what they want and then deciding how to move it forward.

The challenge in that is asking agencies to give or to change, and that's troubling for some, frankly. It would be because they have employees, status, and those kinds of things, right?

The Chair: Thank you very much.

MP Sangha, please, you have six minutes.

Mr. Ramesh Sangha: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you again, witnesses, for coming here today and for your very good input.

My first question will be for you, Mr. Willis. You talked about an invisible disease, that is, an invisible disability. You have your personal and professional experiences of that. Being a lawyer, I have dealt with personal motor vehicle accident claims and personal injury claims and all of that, and I used to get many people with depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder, but this—schizophrenia—is really a very hard type of.... I had a chance to represent one schizophrenic patient too.

Is it better to keep these types of persons who are suffering from schizophrenia in affordable housing, in social housing, or should they be with their families to bring them back to their lives...?

● (1055)

Mr. Victor Willis: Of course, the real piece here is, what's best for that individual? I think we've heard from a number of our members here at the table about the individual. What's their choice? Then there are those who care, the surrounding caregivers, and I would count myself as one. What do we think we can do to support that individual?

I think the idea, though, that.... I have more stories, other than the one I gave, of somebody with a major mental illness who was able to recover, move out of affordable or supportive housing, which costs money, and was able to get back on their feet and in fact become a productive member of society.

The other part of the opportunity that I think exists for reducing poverty is increasing the access to achieving somebody's potential. There are numerous barriers. To give you a quick example from a poverty-reduction point of view, in Ontario there are 840 or 850-plus rules for social assistance. On any given day, it's probably pretty hard for the workers, and certainly the individual, to understand how all those rules apply. Then we could have some municipal rules, and let's have some federal rules as well.

I think what we've been talking about here today are some of the ways to streamline or integrate what we do so that it has the greatest impact. How can people make the choices they need to make in order to best live up to their opportunity and potential, which all Canadians would want? That takes a couple of things: the right door being open at the right time, or the right program being available for the person, and the time it takes for somebody to actually make those steps. Many programs are very time limited, but people don't live on a six-month or nine-month trajectory. They often take years to increase their ability to understand what they do, especially for people with a complex mental health history, who may have perceptual difficulties and relationships that were lost.

I go back to the trauma, which is the most important thing about this. Having a mental health crisis, losing your understanding of how reality affects you, how it affects your family members, and what it means to your understanding of your rights as a person, because maybe those rights were removed for a period of time—you were put into hospital and you were treated—all of these things have a real trauma to them. You talk about PTSD, but let's add that onto perhaps some sort of psychosis disorder as well.

To unravel that, to begin to trust again, and to begin to have good, real relationships, that's not a nine-month program. That's going to take quite a bit of time. It takes the kinds of community resources that we have here, which wrap their hands around the person and, with them, walk them through finding their ability to get back on their feet. The expectation has to be that recovery is possible—it has to be—and that we are going to design programs to make that the measurable indicator for success. It's not custodial care. It's not taking care of people. It's giving people these tools so that they can in fact be recovered and productive members of society.

Mr. Ramesh Sangha: When you feel they have attained this stage, you feel that they can go for employment. Do you think it is better for the employers to hire this type of person, who is now ready to go for employment, and who will be very helpful to the employer and very loyal because they know if they get employment it will be good for them to be busy with the employment? Is this the best way to get rid of our poverty and is this a strategy for poverty reduction? Is it the one that can be possible?

Mr. Victor Willis: If you'd like a recommendation, yes. Make sure that programs actually lead out of poverty into employment and into choice and the ability to participate as full members of society.

We know that having meaningful activity and employment works. We've also heard about guaranteed income and a few of the other tools that are here. Those tools are part of creating the platforms or the ramp as I mentioned earlier, but we need to actually describe what the ramp is like. Engineers have figured out the ramp for wheelchairs. We now need to figure out the ramp for mental health so that people do not fall back into poverty, especially if they have episodic challenges. That means having an appropriate insurance system. That means that the health care system has to, in fact, be able to catch people appropriately, get them back on their feet, and have them recover.

● (1100)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We now go over to MP Brassard, please, for six minutes.

Mr. John Brassard: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I am a guest on this committee. I haven't had the opportunity to travel across the country as members of the committee have. I know we're getting to the end of our time. Oftentimes when people appear before committee—at least this has been my experience on the veterans affairs committee—they'll say to you afterwards that they wish they'd have said something.

You guys can fight amongst yourselves for the time, but I'm going to give you an opportunity to say what you thought you should have said by this point. I'll start with Mr. Whittle.

Mr. Alan Whittle: You know, I think I came here mostly wanting to talk about housing and my experience in housing, and I think I addressed most of that. I think the only thing that I would leave with you is that homelessness is not a defect. It is not a permanent condition. It is something that we can resolve for every one of our families, neighbours, or members of our community.

Ms. Deirdre Pike: I want to be clear that when I'm speaking about women's homelessness, I'm speaking about single women—not violence against women—86% of whom have children but not access to them. Housing would provide a chance for family reunification. So be clear about that. We need a living wage, and the Government of Canada needs to address the issue of precarious employment by making sure that it supports a living wage with appropriate increases for costs of living. Finally, we need housing with support so that women and men and trans people and LGBTQ people can sing for their lives.

Ms. Alana Baltzar: I want to add two quick points. I spoke at the social audit that we had in Hamilton in February. I am also one of the storytellers. That is one of the best experiences I've had, with people genuinely listening and wanting to know what it's like to live in poverty. One of the best recommendations I could give for anyone to get even a taste of what poverty is like is to go with someone to a food bank. Help them out with the trip. You'll be there half the day. There's a lot of waiting there.

The other thing I want to touch on is housing. I live in social housing, CityHousing Hamilton. It took me three months to get one repair done, and that was just to get a plumber to come out to find out why my sink was backing up. It took two trips to the head of maintenance to say, “Why isn't this resolved?” I had to make an agreement with them that if the head of maintenance agreed to send a plumber out, I would have to talk to one of the other maintenance people about getting repairs done, which to me means they're kind of sick of seeing my face and hearing me stand up for my rights as a tenant.

I'm going to be straight up. I know it's social housing, but legally, as a tenant, I have a right to safe housing, housing in which I don't have to wear a face mask to walk down my hallway because it reeks and I don't want to know what's in the air there. I have that right, and if it comes down to it, I have no issues taking CityHousing to the landlord and tenant board.

Housing is another key point when you're working with vulnerable people. I used to be in the HOMES program, which Alan Whittle mentioned today. The main reason I left that program was that my superintendent was harassing me. For over two and half years there was non-stop harassment. I couldn't get Good Shepherd to do anything—no offence—because the relationship, and he spoke about this, with the property managers has to be maintained. If you lose that relationship, you're losing affordable housing, not just for that one tenant but for the other tenants who depend on that.

Ms. Sandra Datars Bere: I was raised in a small town in southern Ontario. I think a lot about my reality of living for 30 years now in a larger urban community, although when you ask me where my home is, I will tell you that it's that small community, that town in southern Ontario.

I use the word “community” specifically. We have great communities doing great things, but what we've lost is the concept of community. There's been a lot of discussion about what we need in our communities, whether it's affordable housing or supports to people, but we need empathy in our communities. We need supports for people who are experiencing difficulties.

I recently hosted a very challenging community event, where we started to really see the divide between what people think. In our community, that's a challenge. Whether there are concerns about racism or those kinds of things, those are coming out more. The lack of community....

I appreciate that it isn't necessarily a federal responsibility or a provincial responsibility. It lays more on the municipal responsibility. It's for us to take the resources we receive from the federal government—as you've indicated, they grow—and to use those in ways that support the community approach to things, where people wrap around others in our communities and address issues of poverty in ways that we've always done, but that we've forgotten how to do. That's what we need to get back to.

● (1105)

The Chair: Mr. Willis, they've left you about 30 seconds. Go ahead, take a minute.

Mr. Victor Willis: This is a fabulous table.

Very quickly, I sit as a member of the mental health and addictions leadership council in Ontario. We've had the opportunity to look at some of the systems and how they relate, so thank you for what I wasn't able to say.

I think the opportunity for the federal government is in the way that people are engaged with the tax system and in being able to look at benefits. A housing benefit would be hugely helpful.

The other part is recognizing that as people earn income and how they can actually earn that income, there must be some minimum standard for where we decide that poverty exists. Most of our income support systems are well below any acknowledged low income cut-off. You have the ability to actually make those kinds of recommendations—it's within your purview—to raise the bar and raise the opportunity for individuals who are going to recover and who need to be able to use the tools they have. Part of that is within the tax system. I hope you'll look at that.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

You guys were going to split time. You don't really have time. I'm sorry, but you're past—

Mr. John Brassard: I apologize, but I wanted to give the witnesses an opportunity, so I would ask your indulgence to perhaps allow Mr. Poilievre—

The Chair: You're about a minute over, but if you have a very brief question, I'll give you half a minute. Go.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Alana, I wanted to ask you about income support programs for disabled people. You mentioned that you're on the Ontario disability support program. When people on that program get a job and go to work, they start to lose their benefits, and not just income but also drug benefits and housing support. Is this something that has made it harder for you to get into the workforce?

Ms. Alana Baltzar: Absolutely, yes, when you transition from social assistance to paid work employment. At ODSP they're a bit better when it comes to reductions in welfare, but you only get $200. Once you hit that $200 point, they start deducting from you.

Once you start making set amounts of money, you are no longer eligible for your medical and dental programs. That is a problem and it is a barrier, but I would have to say that the biggest barrier to the workforce for me is the fact that while I have a diploma in social work, if you want to work in social work, there are conflict-of-interest policies in place that prohibit you from working for the agencies you have to access for support.

I would love to work for the Good Shepherd, but because I'm a former client of the Good Shepherd, I am ineligible to apply for a position with them for another nine months. At that point, it'll be two years.

The Chair: That's an interesting point. Thank you.

Finally, we have Wayne Long.

Mr. Wayne Long: Thank you, Chair.

Again, thanks to everybody who gave their presentations today.

Mr. Whittle, can you talk very briefly on transitional housing and how important transitional housing is? I'm going to ask that same question with respect to London.

In Saint John, we have shelters, the HPS, and affordable housing, certainly, but there's no transitional housing. Can you talk to me about how important it is and what you think we can do federally to come up with a solid transitional housing program?

Mr. Alan Whittle: That's actually a significant question, because I think it was part of the new HPS round that transitional housing could not be supported.

I think the important thing about transitional housing is that it doesn't need to be there for everybody, but there are definitely certain groups in particular that require it. I'm going to use as an example street-involved women, who may come with addictions and mental health issues and have been involved in the sex trade. There may be a whole cluster of issues that come to bear that require time to relearn some skills, to relearn how to live with other people in a community setting. Similarly, addictions is another area where I think transitional housing can be critical.

● (1110)

Mr. Wayne Long: Deirdre, could you also give me your comments on transitional housing and how important you think it would be?

Ms. Deirdre Pike: For sure.

Right now, in Hamilton, we have, I think, 69 units at one of our transitional housing facilities for women. It is not funded by housing first. It's not seen as a pillar of that, yet that is the place where women are able to get all the supports in lots of the ways we're talking about. The low barrier is what's really important. We've just started an overnight drop-in at that very same place that is providing an even lower barrier to access. The constant tension I think you will need to struggle with, and that we all struggle with, is how much you put into affordable housing so that we can really house people but have these low barriers. They are both needed. It's both-and, not either-or.

Mr. Wayne Long: I'm surprised, going across the country and going to shelters and talking about investments in affordable housing, by the lack of transitional housing.

Ms. Datars Bere, can you talk to me about London and what you have for transitional housing and the need you see, federally, for us to be more involved in it?

Ms. Sandra Datars Bere: As my colleagues have spoken about, we have an HPS program. We have shelters. We're actually reducing the number of shelter beds, because we have ascribed to and want to move forward on a housing first approach. I think I'm going to use the good words of my colleague beside me, who said that it's about making sure there's a place for people to live and putting transitional supports around them that are respectful of what happens to people in different situations.

There's no doubt in my mind that there are people who need transitional housing at a period of time. There are also people who choose not necessarily to move into affordable housing, because they don't know how to manage the affordable housing reality. Paying rent and those kinds of things are harder for some people, so there is always going to be a need for people to be in transitional housing. We're trying to get to a model where people have housing first, and then we go from there to support them and put supports around them.

Mr. Wayne Long: Perfect.

Mr. Whittle, with respect to housing first and Chez Soi, are we doing a good enough job? Are there enough wraparound services? Again, we move people through shelters and transitional housing into houses, but without that support, they can digress and move backwards. Are we doing the right things federally to make sure there are enough wraparound services?

Mr. Alan Whittle: In terms of the federal programs? No.

Mr. Wayne Long: What can we do better?

Mr. Alan Whittle: I'll use as an example the fact that health services are not funded as part of the HPS. They're time limited to two years. I think my colleague spoke to the whole issue of time. There is a journey a person goes through in recovery, and it isn't necessarily two years.

Mr. Wayne Long: Right.

Ms. Pike, do you want to comment on wraparound services?

Ms. Deirdre Pike: We talk about women moving into a first apartment after living in maybe a shelter and then transitional housing. They're so institutionalized that the skill of cooking, for example, is gone by then. They experience things like just staring at a blank wall not knowing where a natural community for them is. The wraparound is networking, it's social, it's nurturing, and it's broad. I really think we need to broaden the scope.

Mr. Wayne Long: Ms. Datars Bere.

Ms. Sandra Datars Bere: The largest-growing population on our social assistance rolls right now in the city of London is men between the ages of 45 and 65. While I appreciate, Deirdre, your point about women, it's a huge problem for us in terms of how to support individuals who have been working in industries where there are no longer jobs for them. They are single individuals who have not necessarily engaged in supports in the community before and now are finding very difficult challenges.

I think another piece we need to be thinking about is the aging population. Then there are seniors who have mental health issues who don't necessarily fit well into long-term care facilities or who can't get in. They seriously need housing support, and they don't fit in our system anywhere, in my opinion.

Mr. Wayne Long: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

This has been a very long study, the longest study this committee has been involved in to date. Both panels this morning were absolutely amazing. It's great to end on such a good note.

I think I can speak for all of us when I say that we learned a great deal by going across this country, by meeting with people in Ottawa, and by listening more than we spoke. My background is in the non-profit sector, working with charitable organizations like the YMCA and the Boys and Girls Club. I did that for about a decade, but I can say that I learned more in this last year about the realities of this country because of folks like you. Thank you so much for being here today.

Thank you to the committee for being as one, really, in terms of understanding that this is not a partisan issue. This is very much a Canadian issue. It is an issue that we hope will be, at some point, something our kids will read about in the history books.

Thank you to everybody here who makes these meetings possible, and to the folks who are integral in making sure that all of this information is captured and articulated. I look forward to going through the report we will be producing in the very near future.

Thank you very much to all of you.

The meeting is adjourned.