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Chair

Mr. Andy Fillmore

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● (1530)

[*English*]

The Chair (Mr. Andy Fillmore (Halifax, Lib.)): It's 3:30. We'll come to order.

Welcome, everyone.

I would like to acknowledge that we're meeting today on unceded Algonquin territory and we're very grateful for that.

Before we get to our witnesses today from the National Association of Friendship Centres, I want to just get a sense from members. We have only one organization visiting today, so it leaves us a bit of time on our agenda. What I'd like to propose to do with the order of questions is what we did on Tuesday, which is to complete the first order and repeat, and then go to the second page and do the top half, the seven-minute questions. Wherever that leaves us, we'll leave it there, and we can proceed to two pieces of committee business on the draft suicide study budget and communications plan. Does that seem reasonable to everybody?

It looks like I see assent.

Okay, with that decided, I'm very happy to welcome today on behalf of the committee Christopher Sheppard, vice-president of the National Association of Friendship Centres, and Yancy Craig, director of strategic development.

Christopher has travelled to see us today from St. John's, Newfoundland. Yancy Craig has travelled across the street to see us.

We welcome you both. We're very happy to have you here.

I am happy to offer 10 minutes to divide between yourselves as you see fit. When nine minutes comes along, I will hold up the yellow card. When 10 minutes is up, I will hold up the red card. I would ask you to bring it right to a close at that point so that we can get to the questions.

Without further ado, I cede the floor to you.

Mr. Christopher Sheppard (Vice-President, National Association of Friendship Centres): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Distinguished members of the Standing Committee on Indigenous and Northern Affairs, it's an honour and privilege to appear before you again today.

I wish to acknowledge the Algonquin Nation, upon whose traditional territory we are meeting today.

I thank you for this opportunity to share with you the work of the friendship centre movement and the National Association of Friendship Centres relative to the issues of suicide among indigenous peoples and communities.

As you may recall from my previous appearance before the committee, my name is Christopher Sheppard. I am an Inuk from northern Labrador, and I now live and work in St. John's, Newfoundland.

I grew up in the friendship centre movement. I became actively involved with the aboriginal youth council, and I am currently the vice-president of the National Association of Friendship Centres, also known as the NAFC.

Throughout my career within friendship centres, the topic and concerns of suicide have been constant, even after I left my home community in the north and moved south.

Accompanying me today is Mr. Yancy Craig, the NAFC's director of strategic development.

With our time together, I would like to give you a brief overview of the friendship centre movement, the NAFC, and the urban indigenous population of Canada. I would also like to share with you some of the programs and supports of friendship centres and the NAFC in regard to suicide prevention within urban indigenous communities. Time permitting, I will do my best to respond to the questions you may have.

I would like to begin by sharing some facts with you to set the context for the work of the friendship centre movement.

As you may know, 75% of Canada's indigenous people live off reserve. Nearly 60% live in urban areas. Furthermore the indigenous population is growing at a faster rate than the Canadian average. This means there are approximately 840,000 indigenous people living in Canadian cities.

The Canadian indigenous population is also young, with approximately 50% under the age of 24. This presents a tremendous opportunity for Canada's future social, cultural, and economic development.

Among this growing demographic, there is a growing need for mental health supports being observed. Current estimates suggest that 15% of young Canadians between the ages of 14 and 24 cope with some form of anxiety, depression, addictions, or other social distresses. Estimates among indigenous populations are twice the national average, with addictions and suicides being five to six times the national average. Friendship centres know this first-hand, and they have identified the need for additional strategies and capacity for mental health programs for urban indigenous communities, especially among youth.

As I shared with you during my previous appearance, friendship centres emerged beginning in the 1950s out of the need for indigenous people migrating to urban centres to have a friendly and welcoming space to gather and to express their culture. For over half a century, friendship centres have helped urban indigenous people access the vital services they need to succeed in urban settings across Canada. Friendship centres understand the challenges facing our communities, and with the unique wraparound service delivery model, we ensure that we are well equipped to tackle them.

Across the country, friendship centres provide culturally appropriate services for indigenous people living in urban centres, and they have become places for indigenous and non-indigenous people to come together, share traditions, and learn from one another.

Friendship centres are a significant part of Canada's social infrastructure, with more than two million client contacts annually, serving Canada's most vulnerable urban indigenous populations and making the friendship centre movement the country's most significant off-reserve indigenous service delivery infrastructure.

The NAFC was created in 1972 to be the voice of its members nationally and internationally. The NAFC's membership now comprises seven provincial and territorial associations, and 118 member friendship centres across Canada in each of your ridings.

The NAFC has a long and unique relationship with the Government of Canada. For the past 30 years, the NAFC has been the administrator of national programs delivered to friendship centres and other urban indigenous organizations on behalf of the Government of Canada.

While we are a not-for-profit network rather than a politically representative organization, the NAFC enjoys a productive relationship with many other indigenous organizations.

● (1535)

The effects of colonization and residential schools have led to high levels of psychological distress within indigenous communities, elders, and youth. No one is immune to those effects.

This is a concern not just for those indigenous people living on reserve, but also for those in Canada's urban centres. Statistics Canada's report “Lifetime suicidal thoughts among First Nations living off reserve, Métis and Inuit aged 26 to 59: Prevalence and associated characteristics” found that one in five off-reserve indigenous adults has contemplated suicide, and recent reports have shown that this number is continually growing. In the mental health program of one friendship centre alone, over 50% of all current clients have a risk factor for suicide.

Many indigenous people prefer cultural- and heritage-based services that are offered outside of the mainstream medical system. These often include a more holistic view of mental health and its treatments. Friendship centre programming is exactly that.

Friendship centres support culturally safe delivery of these much-needed services in innovative ways. Many centres have health outreach workers to ensure that the health needs of community members are addressed in a cultural and holistic way that addresses the physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual aspects of individuals. These services are available on a one-to-one basis or in a group setting, where action plans are developed to help meet short- and long-term goals of participants.

There are also healing and wellness programs at friendship centres, which provide support to community members seeking to access traditional services and supports, and through which action plans are also developed to help meet the goals of community members.

Friendship centres with addictions and mental health programs offer cultural spaces for individuals with mental health and addictions issues to find the help they need in moving toward a healthier lifestyle. The program also works to make better connections between urban indigenous communities and non-indigenous health services. This is done by educating non-indigenous staff about the specific needs of indigenous people and creating partnerships to connect them with a friendship centre.

Many friendship centres also have elder and youth programs providing the opportunity for open and honest discussions around the topics of healthy lifestyles, where elders share their experiences as survivors of the residential school system and information on other topics that youth may be too intimidated to ask about.

These are but a few examples of how friendship centres help heal our communities, but more needs to be done. Many of our centres do not have the funds or capacity for clinical mental health services. As we have seen with the tragic events in La Loche, Cross Lake, and too many other communities, friendship centres are heavily relied upon for their unique support programs.

The NAFC has taken on efforts to promote healing and wellness in our communities. In 2012, the NAFC's aboriginal youth council embarked on a suicide prevention and awareness project for urban aboriginal youth ages 10 to 24. This included a proposal and call-out for a suicide prevention kit, and resulted in much-needed research on indigenous youth and mental health. More recently, the NAFC launched newjourneys.ca, an online friendship centre resource. The newjourneys.ca site is home to a unique online searchable database that lists programs and services for indigenous people across the country. The site also features engaging stories, news articles, and blog posts written for the most part by indigenous youth.

As part of the development of newjourneys.ca, the NAFC has partnered with Kids Help Phone. This partnership has not only allowed the NAFC to refer indigenous children and youth to a critical emergency service, but it has also allowed Kids Help Phone to become more responsive to the unique needs of indigenous callers.

The friendship centre movement will continue to support individuals and communities, and is a willing partner in suicide prevention and mental health. The friendship centre movement and the NAFC look forward to working with the government and opposition parties to improve the lives of indigenous people in Canada. This will be achieved through core funding investments in friendship centres so that they continue to have the capacity to operate and to meet the needs of their communities, as well as to look at ways that friendship centres can expand their current successful programs that support individuals affected by suicide.

In closing, I would like to reaffirm that there are community-based solutions to complex problems like suicide. Friendship centres work every day to harness the creativity, energy, and knowledge that can unlock new ideas and new thinking that will lead to enduring social change and contribute to the healing and full inclusion of indigenous people in Canada's economic, cultural, and social fabric.

Thank you for allowing me the opportunity to speak to you today. Mr. Craig and I look forward to addressing any questions you might have.

● (1540)

The Chair: Thank you very much for that, Mr. Sheppard. I'm very proud of the work that the Mi'kmaw Friendship Centre in Halifax does in my own community as well.

We're going to go right into the first round of seven-minute questions, with the first question from Michael McLeod.

Mr. Michael McLeod (Northwest Territories, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Thank you to the presenters today.

This is an interesting presentation. It's something that I'm quite interested in and was historically very much involved in. I'm one of the founding members of at least one friendship centre in the Northwest Territories, but I worked on several projects that resulted in friendship centres being established. I spent a lot of time at the national level trying to convince people that we needed more friendship centres in the north.

I did that because I saw the benefit of friendship centres. I've worked as a band manager. I've managed band councils. I've been involved with the Métis. I've been involved with the political organizations quite extensively, and I always found that the restriction to serving only members was too confining. We needed an agency in the community that dealt with everybody on an equal basis, and friendship centres really fit that bill for us.

I've seen the community really benefit from the programs in many different areas, such as language development. We've seen cultural programs where drum-making programs were established. We had elders come in and talk about history. We've seen community gardens being worked on so as to provide food for the community. We've seen services provided out of the facility, a facility that was built out of logs. People are still wondering why we built it out of logs, but that was the only resource we had. It's not very energy efficient, but it still serves its purpose.

We've also seen a lot of good programs, such as moms and tots programs. You would think that everybody had a skill for dealing with children and young babies, and you would think that everybody would know how to handle situations, but those things need to be taught in the communities now because of the residential schools syndrome. A lot of people don't have that skill.

We've had courses put on about FASD. There are support programs run through there, such as alcohol and drug programs and so many others. It served as a drop-in centre for all these years. It also has worked as a homeless shelter, because there's nowhere else to put people who have no place to go.

I have several questions, but I wanted you to talk a bit about the funding gaps, about what problems you're not addressing because you don't have the resources. I know that the cuts to the friendship centres in the last while have been pretty drastic. I know that they've cooled off all the programs that were needed, and I also know that there's been nothing in the area of infrastructure funding for putting facilities in place.

You talked about people living off reserve, but in the Northwest Territories, we don't have reserves, so friendship centres serve us well there. They're there for everybody.

Maybe you could talk about the gaps first. Then I'll ask another couple of questions.

● (1545)

Mr. Christopher Sheppard: Thank you.

In the last few years the funding program that supports friendship centres has gone through what I would say is a fundamental shift. Once upon a time, friendship centres received their money through the Minister of State. It transitioned to the aboriginal friendship centre program, AFCP, and then most recently into the community capacity support program, which falls under the urban aboriginal strategy.

The AFCP, which no longer exists, was a program designed for friendship centres based on the 40-year or 50-year history between friendship centres and the Government of Canada. That has led to, I would say, a substantial shift in how friendship centres are funded. We used to have core funding. It's no longer core funding. That fundamental shift has really changed the way friendship centres are able to operate.

Questions around our eligible expenses, like receptionists and.... I try to explain to people what a friendship centre receptionist is like, so I'll give you the experience of, say, my friendship centre where I come from.

We have a mental health team that consists of a social worker, clinical psychologist, cultural support workers, elder. The receptionist isn't simply saying “Hello, this is the friendship centre, how may I direct your call?” Sometimes the receptionist will say, “Hello,” and there's a person in serious distress on the other line, so how do you prioritize that work? Is it someone that needs to speak to someone right now? Is it someone who can wait an hour? A receptionist isn't just someone who picks up the phone and says, “Hello”. They could be the first one to deal with a huge emergency. They could be the first one to make sure someone gets the help they need. Therefore, for us the idea of having no receptionist in a friendship centre isn't only about someone picking up the phone, it's about whether someone will get the help they need in the amount of time they need it.

The fundamental shift around how friendship centres are funded has been quite significant. It's something that I know the last time we were here we presented on, and we would love to engage with anyone in the room around that, but there has been a fundamental shift in how friendship centres are supported and it creates huge challenges.

One thing that we hear from the north is that funding a friendship centre in the north is very different from funding a friendship centre even in St. John's. I come from the north. I know exactly what that looks like. The costs associated with being able to have a building open and available—

Mr. Michael McLeod: I think you've made your point. I want to ask another question before we're cut off.

In my opinion, every community that has an aboriginal population, or every community that has huge social issues, should have a friendship centre. I think they have a very valuable purpose. I would ask if you agree with that line of thinking.

Mr. Christopher Sheppard: A few years ago, working with Statistics Canada, we actually did some data around communities where there should be a friendship centre. It was significantly different from where we are right now. For instance, in my province there should be nine. There are two.

We look at it as the number of aboriginal individuals in a community and some of the other concerns in that community, but it is very different. The difference is that in the 1970s and 1980s, there was funding available if you wanted to start a friendship centre.

Mr. Michael McLeod: I have one more question.

Are you currently engaged in the review that's taking place right now?

Mr. Christopher Sheppard: I get reviewed next Thursday.

The Chair: Thanks.

The next question is from David Yurdiga.

Mr. David Yurdiga (Fort McMurray—Cold Lake, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'd like to thank the witnesses for being here today. I do have a great passion for friendship centres. I'm not sure how the communities would be without them. I have three friendship centres in my riding.

Over the years, friendship centres have evolved. Before, they were a place to meet, and now they're a place for refuge, for counselling. I know some of them even have food banks within their organization, so it's much appreciated. Some municipalities are even helping with the cost, for example, by giving them a grant for a year. It's a necessity that we all recognize has to be supported to a greater capacity. For many indigenous people, friendship centres are the first point of contact, whether it's socio-economic programs and services.... I know some friendship centres even have employment courses and drafting of resumés, that sort of thing, so it's much appreciated.

What kind of funding would make the friendship centres able to complete their mandate? I'm sure every friendship centre is a little different and in every community the issue of mental health is a big thing. Can you describe what funding is necessary, the magic number that would enable one to carry out the mandate?

● (1550)

Mr. Christopher Sheppard: We always ask friendship centres how much money they really need to do what they're doing. A lot of friendship centres are very good at leveraging money. On average, if they receive $120,000 to $170,000 in core-like funding or whatever, they're really spending on average over $300,000 to make sure that they're still able to hire the people they need and that they have the space, so well over double what is being received now. The reality for friendship centres at this moment is that we don't have a friendship centre funding program.

It is open. Anyone who meets the criteria can apply, which I'm totally open to, but at the same time, if we want to recognize the work that is expected of a friendship centre and to fund them at a level that's appropriate, it's nowhere near what the current number is. It's $43 million in total. It's way bigger than that. When you say numbers like over two million client contacts a year, it's significant. In St. John's it's 33,000 contacts a year in multiple areas.

This is the thing I try to tell people, that providing funding to a friendship centre isn't just “here you go,” and you'll keep doing what you're doing and do the baseline work. When you're leveraging it at one to seven for every dollar that you're getting from the federal government for your core-like funding, there are very few organizations in this country that can leverage at that level. Every dollar shouldn't be looked at as the dollar they're getting; it's these additional dollars that you can get.

The last time I was here I said it's around double what we're already getting to support friendship centres to do what they need to do. Right now they're moving along, applying for every cent that they can, and creating their own revenue to make sure, because when someone does walk through our doors, regardless of who they are, what background they're from—most of them are in really busy downtown parts of the city—you help them. If it's an aboriginal person, you help them; if it's a non-aboriginal person, you help them, because at the end of the day they need that support. They're doing all this work, but really on very little money.

Mr. David Yurdiga: The biggest thing right now is addressing the suicide among our youth. I see even in my riding that from one friendship centre to another they have a different program. Does your national association have a program they can share among all friendship centres? Are there certain minimum guidelines that you have? Do you have one, or are you guys working on a national strategy that can be shared with other friendship centres?

Mr. Christopher Sheppard: Because there is really no central pot of funding for a suicide prevention program or even mental health for that matter, every centre's response is based on the capacity that they have. The friendship centre that I mentioned where 50% of the mental health clients have a risk of suicide, half of the money is coming from Health Canada. The other half is being paid for by the friendship centre itself because no one is able to fund it.

They realize how important it is, but there is no funding, so every friendship centre's reaction or availability of programs is different, depending on what resources they have access to.

I guess our biggest centralized effort around it is especially in the youth council. This is something that came up when I was on the youth council. We looked at a strategic plan, and we asked young people across the country, and this came up as a huge risk factor. They said to develop a proposal, shop it around, and we need to do something about this. We were never able to get traction on it. As huge an issue as it is, we were never able to create a centralized effort because, depending upon which province you're in or which city, there are different resources available. A lot of the time they are supplementing it with their own money.

● (1555)

Mr. David Yurdiga: Another thing I noticed is some of these friendship centres are very resourceful. They go after funding from industry. They have bingo and they have other things that they do to raise money. Some of them are doing an excellent job in providing mental health services but, as you said, it all depends on where they can draw the revenue from. Do you think that the federal government should have a funding specific program just for mental health issues?

Mr. Christopher Sheppard: If we want to make a difference in how mental health is looked at and treated in Canada, especially in indigenous communities, I don't think there's really another option.

Mr. David Yurdiga: Thank you.

The Chair: Thanks.

Niki Ashton, please, for the next question.

Ms. Niki Ashton (Churchill—Keewatinook Aski, NDP): Thanks so much for being here today and for the important work you do. I'm very proud of the work that the four friendship centres in our constituency in northern Manitoba do. It strikes me that oftentimes friendship centres are really the only option for so many young people in our communities, and also for young people who come in from the neighbouring first nations, whether it's for visiting family or coming to school for a few months. Really, it's the friendship centre that's there for them.

I know there's a robust discussion around the needs for mental health supports in communities. I'd certainly like to hear your thoughts on that, but the first thing I want to say is that one of the discussions that came up post-suicide crisis in Pimicikamak Cree Nation or Cross Lake, in northern Manitoba, was about kids wanting access to recreation services. In fact, Amber Muskego, a very articulate and courageous young woman, came out and talked about the lack of recreation services. She was talking with me one on one and asking why they don't have something like a friendship centre, because she knew of the friendship centre in Thompson.

How important do you think it is that there be recreation services in first nations? Obviously, this being a clear federal jurisdiction, how important is it for the federal government to support recreation services on first nations as a way of preventing suicide?

Mr. Christopher Sheppard: Maybe I'll give some personal background on myself. I'm originally from an isolated Inuit community in the north. I lived there for 17 years. It's a super-strong recreation community. Most of the communities in my area have very strong recreation and sports programs and very strong after-school programs. When I moved, it was one of the more shocking realities to see communities that didn't have that. I'm from a community that isn't a reserve. We have an Inuit government. We have self-government, so we don't face some of those challenges.

One thing I have noticed, which is even relatable to the city, is that when you have young people who have nowhere to go, nothing to do, nowhere safe to be, and all these other barriers piling up, it is not difficult to see how you go down this road of.... I like to remind people that suicide.... I used to be a suicide intervention trainer. It was such a huge concern for our friendship centre that it's what I did. I trained young people, individuals, in how to keep someone alive long enough to get them to someone who could really change their circumstances.

Recreation, the safe space, and the ability for these young people to have somewhere to go are life changing. Most friendship centres have youth programs, after-school programs, that they can go to. It doesn't mean there aren't other barriers that are challenging. When these small things all pile up, sometimes that's what it takes to get a young person to that place, but if there's nowhere for them to go and talk to someone about that.... We've done suicide interventions over Facebook Messenger. We've done them through email. We've had young people walk through the door. It is such a huge concern that even with after-school programming and everything else, there will still be those challenges, but recreation is a game-changer. It's a safe place for people to go to and do an amazing activity.

For those of you who have worked in a community or who have community experience, recreation is also another area that is challenging to fund. We have friendship centres that self-fund volleyball teams for young people and also access to sports. Access to recreation is so challenging, but it can be a huge game-changer because it provides that safe place for young people to go to and have something to do, when maybe they don't even have a safe home to go to. We always look at recreation as so much more than just an activity. It's team building. It's building self-confidence. It's all these things wrapped into one, and trying to explain that to a lot of people is really challenging, because they don't get it or they've never worked in that area.

I worked in youth programming at a friendship centre. I did it for three years. I can see the difference it can make when young people have something they can do. Access is really challenging everywhere. When I see communities that don't have access to this, I find it really shocking that they don't have a safe recreation space to go to.

● (1600)

Ms. Niki Ashton: Thank you for sharing that and for infusing it with your own personal experience as well, which makes it definitely more powerful.

I did want to refer to a news release that was put out in early May by the B.C. Association of Aboriginal Friendship Centres in which they refer to facing a dire crisis, particularly with the ongoing delay and uncertainty about the urban aboriginal strategy funding from the department. I'm wondering if you could speak to that. What is the current situation? What needs to be done at this point?

Mr. Christopher Sheppard: As you know, a portion of the UAS sunsetted March 31 of this previous year. It was recommitted in the current budget, but it has not been released yet. It has not been released to the NAFC or friendship centres yet. As of this point, no friendship centre has received their core funding. Any friendship centre that's currently open is running off of other revenue or other resources to keep their staff and to keep their doors open.

We've been working as closely as we can with department officials to have it released, and to have it drawn down, but right now it still hasn't happened.

Ms. Niki Ashton: Do you have a timeline? Have they given you a timeline? This is pretty shocking.

Mr. Christopher Sheppard: Yancy can answer that one.

Mr. Yancy Craig (Director, Strategic Development, National Association of Friendship Centres): Thank you.

Yes, we were asked by the department to adjust our submission to move forward to get to our contribution agreement, which was required because of the authority change coming from the budget commitment, and we remade our submission yesterday. We're quite hopeful that we'll get some feedback and that funds will flow very quickly, but we haven't received a response to that submission yet.

The Chair: We're out of time. Thank you for that.

The next question is from Mike Bossio, please.

Mr. Mike Bossio (Hastings—Lennox and Addington, Lib.): Thank you, both, so much for being here again.

Christopher, it's great to see you. You certainly enlighten us. We hear so much about the reserve side of life for indigenous peoples in this country, yet most of the population is urban, off reserve. I'm trying to get my head around a few things. Friendship centres are primarily urban. Is that correct? I have a rural riding and I don't have any friendship centres in my riding. I do have a few larger towns, but they don't have a friendship centre, although I would surmise they probably could use one.

How many friendship centres are there across the country?

Mr. Christopher Sheppard: There are 118.

Mr. Mike Bossio: Most of them are in major urban centres like St. John's, Ottawa, Toronto, etc., right? What is the total funding?

Mr. Christopher Sheppard: It's $43 million.

Mr. Mike Bossio: I thought I heard you say that earlier, but I wanted to verify. It's $43 million. If I heard you correctly earlier, every dollar of funding you translate into seven dollars' worth of services.

● (1605)

Mr. Yancy Craig: That was our calculation from the 2014-15 fiscal year. I believe it's been as high as $12. Part of the sources of funding are provincial governments for some services for some friendship centres. Of course some of that funding varies based on priorities that change for different provincial governments as well.

Mr. Mike Bossio: When you're calculating that model, you have a very large volunteer contingent, I assume, that is wrapped into that. What other sources of funding do you get other than the province?

Mr. Christopher Sheppard: For one friendship centre, for example, the core is $160,000. The total annual budget of that centre is about $2 million, and $450,000 is own-source revenue, social economy, social enterprise. Another portion would be private. A lot of friendship centres have support from private industry businesses. Others are municipal money, foundations. Literally, if you walk into a friendship centre, they're probably writing a grant for something.

Mr. Mike Bossio: So you have an army of grant writers as well. Of course, if you could use those resources in a more effective way, it would certainly help you deliver more services. It's part of what I'm getting at. Once again we hear about suicide and the crisis that exists in the north, and I deeply empathize with that. Is it as big a crisis in the friendship centres on the off-reserve side? I heard you say one in five contemplate it.

Mr. Christopher Sheppard: For us I try to use real-world examples. If you're an indigenous person in a city—and I'll speak from an actual example I experienced—and you take someone to, say, the emergency department of a mental health hospital, which I've done, the first question you get from a psychiatrist is, does your government pay for anything for you? I have a young aboriginal person who has made a suicide attempt that day and the question is does the government pay for anything, instead of what do we need to do right now; what do we need to do today; how do we get you into a service or program?

Mr. Mike Bossio: This is exactly where I'm going. You found out ways to deliver services in a much more cost-effective way than our provinces, the federal government, and all of them. A lot of it is born out of necessity and desperation in some instances. You talked earlier about training people to deal with suicide crises situations. How long does it take you to train somebody to deal with that?

Mr. Christopher Sheppard: For me to become a trainer took a week straight. You live where you're doing it for the week. There are different levels. For us, because it is a prevalent issue, we also have a homeless shelter in our friendship centre as part of our services. We try to make sure every employee is trained. It takes around two and a half days to do the full-blown, this is how you.... The big thing is we try to tell people that this is about trying to keep someone alive until you can get them to an appropriate program or service, or to the hospital, or to someone.

A lot of the time, people don't know how to react when someone comes to your door, or calls you, and says that this is happening, that this is what it is.

Mr. Mike Bossio: Have you ever worked with on-reserve organizations in order to transfer those types of skills, so they are once again.... To me, a big part of the issue is that we're not delivering the services where they need to be, and that is in the community itself. It's not being delivered by indigenous individuals within those communities a lot of times. It's outside individuals who don't understand the cultural, historical, or residential school perspective they're dealing with.

Do you find you're able to do that, or is it on reserve or off reserve?

Mr. Christopher Sheppard: It's on reserve and off reserve. The reason I became trained—I don't do it anymore because it's hard to do that every day, but we have other staff who are now taking over that piece. The reason we had our own staff trained, who are aboriginal, was so that when you work with aboriginal clients there's a better understanding of all the other things that happened. We could do it for all of our staff, so that all of our clients at least have access to someone who understands what that looks like. It was important to us not to have to bring people in all the time from the outside to train our staff. Why couldn't we do it ourselves? It does make a significant difference. It's no different from employment programs or anything else.

Mr. Mike Bossio: You've outlined a lot of challenges that exist that you're trying to deal with. A lot of them are funding challenges. If you had an ideal world from a funding standpoint, but also more importantly from a tools standpoint, what would you say the top three issues are that you would like to deal with immediately?

● (1610)

Mr. Christopher Sheppard: First would be a standardized process, or the ability to develop a standardized piece, for organizations. On reserve and off reserve are very different, but the process to get there is the same. You want to work with the people in the community and get them there. We need a tool, or the ability to create a tool, that people can use and understand how to use.

Second would be a clear idea of where you go to get this support. You tell people. They get handed a piece of paper and whatever.

Third, I would say would be more awareness that this is an issue.

The Chair: Excellent. Thank you for that.

We're going to the five-minute questions now, and the first question comes from Arnold Viersen.

Mr. Arnold Viersen (Peace River—Westlock, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Thank you for being here again today.

I need one point of clarification. Are friendship centres charities?

Mr. Yancy Craig: Many of them are registered charities, yes.

Mr. Arnold Viersen: Okay, so it's not a national organization. They're all individual.

Mr. Yancy Craig: Right. The national association, our office at the NAFC, is incorporated federally, so we fall under the Canada Not-for-profit Corporations Act, but individual centres are generally incorporated in their province or territory, and most of them are registered charities.

Mr. Arnold Viersen: Yes, because I have three friendship centres in my riding, and they seem to be registered with Alberta. They're Alberta friendship centres, so that clarifies that for me.

Mr. Yancy Craig: To clarify, part of that is we have a federated structure. There are seven provincial and territorial associations, so that would explain that in Alberta.

Mr. Arnold Viersen: Okay.

In my own research on suicide, especially in indigenous communities but just broadly, a lot of times that suicide becomes just one identifier, and it doesn't necessarily break it down into non-indigenous versus indigenous. I don't like to deal with it as non-indigenous versus indigenous. I deal with it generally, as in what the underlying causes are for suicide attempts and things like that. They're linked. A major driver seems to be child abuse, or sexual assault, or some sort of combination of those.

Would that characterize your experience with suicide attempts? It seems to be that for 25% to 30% of attempted cases or successful cases of suicide, there seems to have been some underlying sexual assault or child abuse issues. Would that characterize your experiences?

Mr. Christopher Sheppard: Every person I've worked with or have done an intervention with is very different. One person might be okay with experiencing some of those pieces. Then you have someone who has a hard time finding a job, suffers from addiction, can't find a place to live, doesn't have a whole lot of support, or you could have someone who has one catastrophic event or thing happen to them. In my experience, I've never been able to characterize them except for saying that every person has dealt with those situations differently in their ability to manage them.

One thing which I think is really difficult for non-indigenous Canadians to understand is when a non-indigenous Canadian dies by suicide, it is a huge shock in the entire community; it is a big thing, and when a young indigenous person or an indigenous person dies by suicide, it is another one. This has always been a challenge for me because it has happened so often.

In my region of the country, we had one of the highest rates of suicide in the world when I was a teenager. I was in one community where there were three suicides in one week. When you work with a young woman who has lost 20 members of her family to suicide, it isn't the same outcry as the general population when it comes to people dying by suicide.

People ask, how did you normalize it, why did you normalize it? You don't really have another option if you want to keep your mental capacity intact. It's really challenging to get through those situations. For non-indigenous Canadians, I find it's difficult because you haven't had to live through it over and over again. It's not like we fly in mental health counsellors and they're gone five days later; or we're able to get someone into the hospital because we've had a string of suicides in the city, but then there's nothing, no other support; or you're told that you're aboriginal and someone else should be giving you a psychiatrist instead of coming to the main help centre.

There's this huge separation between non-indigenous Canadians understanding the reality of suicide for indigenous people. Why is this such a mystery? You look at all the underlying points and all the barriers that people face every day, and it's not that difficult to start to piece together why you would have trouble thinking of continuing to live. You have nowhere to sleep. You have no food. No one seems to care about helping you get a job. That's your life. That's what you live every day.

● (1615)

The Chair: I'm sorry, Arnold, we're out of time.

The next question is from Gary Anandasangaree, please.

Mr. Gary Anandasangaree (Scarborough—Rouge Park, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Sheppard, for coming back to us again.

I have a couple of questions. First, with respect to your experience in the urban setting, what would you say the top three things that we as government, and through you as organizations, need to do in order to address this issue in a meaningful way?

Mr. Christopher Sheppard: I would say the first big one is supporting organizations at a realistic level to offer the services that they need to offer. Some of the federal government departments do really amazing work in some of these areas. We have friendship centres that have amazing relationships with Health Canada, and other areas where they are able to get a portion of the funds or project money to do this kind of work. It's just that the resources are limited.

Second, I would think infrastructure money is amazing. Infrastructure money that makes a huge difference to people in urban settings is even more amazing, for instance, housing. We know that housing on reserve and in the north is a huge issue. You can imagine how challenging it is for an indigenous person in an urban setting to have housing. We have a homeless shelter because it is a necessity. We have aboriginal people who have nowhere to live, and unless you make a certain amount of money, you may never find a suitable place to live. Infrastructure money may be about housing, transitional housing, something. We do emergency housing. We would love to do transitional housing to help people. We do all this other work, but housing is a huge thing for us.

Third would be providing real support for urban aboriginal young people. Historically, we were able to deliver another federal program that no longer exists, that was focused around urban indigenous young people, and some of the indicators are mind blowing. If you google “cultural connections for aboriginal youth” or “UMAYC”, urban multipurpose aboriginal youth centres, you'll see some of the amazing work that has been done across the country in friendship centres and out of friendship centres, because it was delivered across the country through various organizations and even through departments themselves. That was an amazingly successful program that created a lot of amazing young indigenous people across the country who attended a friendship centre program that supported them to get to a place where they can be successful. I'm one of the people who came out of that. It no longer exists. This is the thing: when you have successful programs that no longer exist, it's disappointing.

Mr. Gary Anandasangaree: You mentioned some of the work that our departments do, and you said there were some good programs. What would be a couple that are directly linked to suicides that are regional and could be expanded to other parts of the country?

Mr. Christopher Sheppard: There is some work being done through some of the residential school money, through IRSSA, and through some of the other funds. One of the biggest successes I've seen besides the Indian residential school money and being able to support those people in the broader community, has been transportation. Some of the work is with Health Canada's first nations and Inuit health branch. Enabling transportation to programs is huge. Transportation is a huge barrier in pretty much every community, so when people are able to get to things, it makes a huge difference.

It will be important to look across the different areas that do urban aboriginal funding and see that there are some amazing success stories with some amazing people working in them. Many friendship centres have relationships with Indigenous Affairs regionally that are amazing. But sometimes it doesn't feel like that flows all the way up. Sometimes it feels like you understand what it is in the community, you understand what it is regionally, but then when it gets to the national piece, it doesn't exist, and those relationships aren't there.

● (1620)

Mr. Gary Anandasangaree: It's the consistency, then.

I'll go to education. What types of supports do you offer toward educational attainment? It's a very complex issue but....

Mr. Christopher Sheppard: It depends upon to which friendship centre you go. If you go to the friendship centre in Halifax, they do upgrading, GEDs, acquiring a high school certificate, working toward training. Other friendship centres have alternative schools. It really depends on the relationship they have provincially around education on what you're able to do.

The Chair: We're out of time, Gary. Thanks.

The next question comes from Cathy McLeod, please.

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

First of all, I know that we're here to discuss the issue of suicide prevention and that horrific thing that you have to deal with all the time, but I have to go back because I'm actually quite stunned. The one thing I've heard agreement on at this table is that we are all amazed at what friendship centres do. I have a friendship centre in my riding. The building is not very great, but it has people with passion who do an absolutely phenomenal job, and I will admit, on a shoestring budget.

The funding issue does disturb me, though. The minister was here on May 5, and she was asked that question in terms of what's happening with the funding, and at that time, she said there is funding for “friendship centres, which is secure. Over the past two years they have been administering the whole of the [UAS]...”. Now, I think you are only doing $43 million out of $50 million of it, but it's not the whole. She says the money's booked. All they have to do is sign the contribution agreement to get the money to flow.

I remember in the friendship centre where I was many years ago they were handing out pink slips in April because they didn't know if the money was flowing or not. They didn't have the money. What I'm hearing is the money is not there. First of all, perhaps you could clarify, is it because you haven't signed the contribution agreement? The minister said that on May 5. We're a couple of months into the fiscal year. Are pink slips happening in some of your friendship centres?

Mr. Christopher Sheppard: I'll take a portion, and you take a portion.

Mr. Yancy Craig: I believe the minister is correct in that the authority for the department for the funding exists post-budget, and we've been in discussions with the public servants who manage the program, and they've requested us to reconfigure our contribution agreement. We had to produce a new work plan because of the way the authorities for the renewal of the funds as announced in the budget have come to fruition. We had to pull a lot of extra information together as part of that request.

As I said earlier, we made our submission yesterday. We understand that once we've met the lens through which it's being viewed at the bureaucratic level, then we'll move very quickly toward a funding agreement. Then we will indeed be able to flow the funds from the national office as we administer the $43-million portion.

Mrs. Cathy McLeod: In the meantime, were you given emergency money? Were you given anything, or have friendship centres been laying off staff?

Mr. Yancy Craig: We understand some friendship centres in some areas either have or are at risk of losing staff.

Part of the challenge, I think, was a lot of the concern around the sunsetting of a large portion of the funds. It made everyone quite anxious for the budget announcement. Of course, that happened later, and the usual cycle then would have happened. Normally, towards the end of the calendar year, we'd be going through the applications and calls for proposal processes to maintain continuity of funding for the new fiscal year starting April 1. That, of course, has caused delays because of the wait for the budget announcement on the confirmation of funds.

● (1625)

Mrs. Cathy McLeod: The minister at the time indicated that because friendship centres weren't the only organization providing services for urban aboriginals that you were responsible for the entire fund. How much has been cut back in terms of what is going to flow through your friendship centres, and is that going to have an impact on any of the programs such as some of the work you're doing around suicide prevention?

Mr. Yancy Craig: Our understanding is that we're going to receive the full $43 million, so it won't be a cutback in funds. The issue is the delay that we've been experiencing as we've been adjusting to the new requirements, but as I say, we're hopeful that will be resolved soon. And, yes, it is having an impact.

Chris can speak to the impact perhaps even more directly than I could.

Mr. Christopher Sheppard: A lot of friendship centres have not just operation programming or whatever, they also have a lot of other programs and services. A lot of the time this isn't the only delay in funding. A lot of friendship centres have other programs that are also delayed. It's really challenging to keep employees when you don't know when your money is coming.

A lot of friendship centres have historically kept staff on because of the anticipated funding, but when it gets to this point, you don't know.

The Chair: Okay, thanks.

Ms. Lockhart.

Mrs. Alaina Lockhart (Fundy Royal, Lib.): Thank you.

Thank you very much for your presentation. It's been very helpful.

One of the things that the Truth and Reconciliation Commission suggested was that we recognize the value of aboriginal healing practices. I'm assuming that's challenging in an off-reserve situation. Could you give some sense of—

Mr. Christopher Sheppard: I don't find it challenging. This is the thing: A lot of Canadians, even in my own province, have this idea that indigenous people live on reserve, that that is where they all are. They don't think that I have access to an elder who's lived in St. John's for 40 years, who speaks Inuktitut, and is able to communicate traditionally. They don't realize that I have access to those people. Most friendship centres have elders. A lot of friendship centres are hubs of cultural revitalization for people who left their communities. A lot of friendship centres have language programming, cultural programming. Every program and service at most friendship centres, when they're developed from the ground up, look at whether the program is culturally appropriate. For example, most people think of a mental health team as a psychiatrist and a clinical psychologist, yet ours consists of a clinical social worker, a psychologist, cultural support workers, and an elder.

I don't find it challenging, and I know a lot of friendship centres don't find it challenging, either. There are a lot of aboriginal people who live in the city, and there are a lot of aboriginal elders who live there, too. You can call and ask them to come in, because you might want to do a ceremony, for example. It isn't challenging. I think the challenging part sometimes is finding innovative ways to do it in the city, but it's totally possible. A lot of us are founders or elders. It's a common thought that it's challenging or difficult. We have third-generation young people who've never lived on a reserve or in an aboriginal community. A young person from Halifax looked at me and said, “Don't ask me where my community is, because my community is Halifax. That's where I'm from. I'm an indigenous person, but I live in Halifax”. I said, “Okay, duly noted”.

Mrs. Alaina Lockhart: This is a small question but it could be fairly broad. Going through this review, is there one thing you would tell the federal government not to do?

Mr. Christopher Sheppard: Don't assume that something is going to work for everyone. One thing I like to tell people is that I'm glad I'm here. I'm glad I'm able to be here talking for the National Association of Friendship Centres, because the urban piece is really important. It is also important to understand the differences between communities. Different things are going to be required depending on where you live and depending on your cultural background. There are cultural practices and cultural beliefs for almost everything. For example, there are cultural beliefs around when your life ends.

There are all these different pieces. It's important not to think that you're going to come up with something that will work for every single indigenous person in this country. Some of the best resources at your disposal are the regional people in your departments who know the communities and have amazing relationships with them. It's great that I'm here and that I can speak about some friendship centre experiences, but you should remember that those will be different depending on where you are and what your cultural background is. There are communities where homelessness might not be one of the factors. You have to look at suicide as a combination of a whole bunch of complex issues. Friendship centres try to look at as many as they can. St. John's, for instance, doesn't do employment services. We don't have that program, so that's an area where it's a huge concern. Using as many regional resources as possible is really important.

● (1630)

Mrs. Alaina Lockhart: Thank you.

As a fellow maritimer, I can appreciate that.

Mr. Yancy Craig: Flexibility is important. We all know that programs are designed by governments for specific purposes, but flexibility on serving in the community, the one delivering the service, is very important. Across the friendship centres, we have 60 years of experience in meeting needs directly and adapting our services, so allowing that flexibility is a fairly low risk proposition.

The Chair: Thanks for that.

Before we get to the three-minute question from Niki Ashton, I wanted to let members know that by the consent we had at the beginning of the meeting, once Ms. Ashton is done her three-minute question, we'll have a seven-minute question from Don Rusnak, a seven-minute question from David Yurdiga, and a seven-minute question from Niki Ashton, and then we'll end the session with the association.

Ms. Ashton, please.

Ms. Niki Ashton: That's great. Thank you very much.

I want to revisit the discussion around the fact that your funding hasn't been renewed yet. I'm pretty alarmed to hear about that. Again, there are four friendship centres in our constituency. It's the only place for young people in many cases. Very important programming is going on, and while I appreciate that you've submitted the papers as you've been asked to do, we are talking about two months in. This whole discussion around suicide and the great work you do, all of that stuff, if at the end of the day we're talking about the friendship centres not having the funding they require to do the programming that's necessary, we have a real problem on our hands.

Given there is so little time in this round, could you tell us what you're hearing from friendship centres? Is there a sense of urgency for this situation to be remedied immediately?

Mr. Christopher Sheppard: I work with all the friendship centres in the Atlantic region, so I hear it every day. We had a technical call yesterday and a lot of the regional people were saying they are hearing a lot of the friendship centres' concerns as well. It goes back to the shift in friendship centre funding. It used to be simple. This is friendship centre funding. It's there. It will continue to be there, and that was it. It was a permanent program with the government. There were modest delays back then but not as much when you're redoing funding and it has to be drawn down again, and it's sunsetting. That's the huge difference between previous programs, and the new programs that exist now. It's not just about this being renewed. It's all the other intricacies of a new program that was not just for friendship centres and not just for core funding and these are the things you're able to do.

Because of the fundamental shift, it is a lot more complex, and it is affecting friendship centres today and yesterday. How many organizations does anyone in this room know that could bankroll sometimes 30 staff or even five staff without any core funding? Not a lot of organizations have that capacity to keep that going, and the longer it goes, the more challenging it is, and then you have to make tough decisions. You are bound by labour laws and other legal pieces, that if you have to lay off someone, there are other implications than just shutting your doors.

It is a challenge, and we are hearing about it.

● (1635)

The Chair: I think we're out of time, Niki. Thanks.

We're going to go back to the seven-minute questions, and the first of the three is from Don Rusnak.

Mr. Don Rusnak (Thunder Bay—Rainy River, Lib.): Thanks for coming before the committee again. I know you guys were here previously, and the friendship centres in my communities do an amazing job. I have three in my communities but only two in my riding.

I've worked with workers in the court worker program in Thunder Bay, but I'm not aware.... We have a friendship centre in Thunder Bay. That's the one in my community but not in my riding. We have one in Atikokan and one in Fort Frances in northwestern Ontario. I'm sure you're familiar with it. I'm not aware of any work they're doing in suicide prevention now. Of course, I am familiar with people from the Thunder Bay friendship centre and the Atikokan friendship centre. I have yet to meet with people from the Fort Frances centre.

Can you give any examples from that area of the country about the work they're doing in suicide prevention?

Mr. Christopher Sheppard: I've been to Kenora. One of my best friends is from Fort Frances. She was the president of our aboriginal youth council when I was on the youth council. She was heavily involved when we did our strategic plan, and suicide prevention came up as a huge issue.

We couldn't get anyone to fund it. We had a plan and what was developed over time was we could have young people in each of the friendship centres trained, so that if young people in their communities were going through this, there would be someone trained. When we asked the young people who were involved in friendship centres across the country what their priorities were, suicide was one of them.

We did as much as we could at the time. That was in 2010-11. We wrote a proposal, launched a suicide prevention tool kit and some other pieces, but we weren't able to get any traction on it. This is the thing: depending on what community you're in, if you can access support...it's really challenging but a huge piece of that effort was led by the president at the time who was from the Fort Frances centre.

Mr. Don Rusnak: Are you aware of any programs that are operating successfully anywhere else in Ontario?

Mr. Christopher Sheppard: I'm not aware of any specifically. I could always ask, reach out to the Ontario federation and see. This is the thing: every region and every friendship centre is different. Every friendship centre has an independent board, voluntarily elected by their communities. Unless it's a provincial-wide program, you would have to reach out to each centre and ask them what they're doing.

Mr. Don Rusnak: To switch gears a little bit, I'm a big fan of collaboration. I'm familiar with the Thunder Bay centre. I know that the court workers collaborate with other workers at the courthouse to provide the amazing services they do in Thunder Bay. In terms of suicide prevention across friendship centres, do you know of any examples of co-operation toward suicide prevention that the centres are engaging in and that can be shared with the committee in terms of any best practices?

Mr. Christopher Sheppard: I think our biggest example is the youth piece. They came together as young people from every region to build this piece, to reach out across the country, to try to find that common piece with all of them. It was all led by young people. They reached out to other young people, found out that this was a huge concern, and worked really hard to build proposals and tool kits and everything else. That's the biggest collaboration I know of within friendship centres, because it was made up of so many young people from every region.

One of the best parts about having a network of friendship centres is that a lot of times, if you're dealing with a serious issue or something really intense, you can reach out to another centre that does this kind of work. I know that some centres have reached out to us, in the centre where I work, about what you do around this issue, how you get people trained, and what it looks like. I trained with some people from Saskatchewan when I was trained. At any given time, any number of friendship centres may be reaching out to other centres.

That said, it is challenging to find a program or something where you can do something at this level in every centre or across the country. It is fractured.

● (1640)

Mr. Yancy Craig: Certainly at the national office, part of that job of coordination is sharing information and sharing best practices through our communications across the network of friendship centres. That's something we do quite often. We profile various interventions that are successful. Chris alluded to the fact that our provincial and territorial folks have a relationship with the provincial ministries and provincial governments, and again, that support varies as well.

Mr. Don Rusnak: In your view, how can friendship centres support the movement towards community-driven approaches and strategies in the design and delivery of mental health and suicide services?

Mr. Christopher Sheppard: I think if there were a strategic approach by the government to look at mental health and suicide, and then it were multi-jurisdictional, say, or interdepartmental, and you invited people to the table, whether it's NAFC or whether it's friendship centres, we could reach out to all of those centres. We have the ability to reach out to all of them.

If there's a strategy or an organized effort towards a certain area, even for feedback, we are able to reach out to those 118 friendship centres pretty quickly and ask them what they're doing, ask them what works. We've looked at other programs we've done to try to look at expanding them and taking them out across the country because they've been so successful. I think one of the best things would be to engage with people who can reach those community members and just ask them if there is an amazing suicide prevention program that really works in their community.

For us, a big thing is having everyone trained so they know what to do. When someone walks through your door and there's a risk of suicide, what do you do? Who do you call? Reaching out and using the NAFC, for instance, to reach out to those centres would be very beneficial.

The Chair: We're out of time there, Don. Thanks.

The next questioner is David Yurdiga.

Mr. David Yurdiga: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I will be sharing some of my time, a small portion of it, with Cathy McLeod.

I noticed the youth participation in a lot of programs in various communities. I have the feeling that the youth want to get in touch with their past, as far as cultural programming goes. Are you aware of any programs that deal with traditional therapies and medicines?

Mr. Christopher Sheppard: If you go to most friendship centres' youth programs.... The reason they are so successful—and we have tried to say this in any way possible—is that having a young indigenous person be confident in who they are as an indigenous person and know their culture makes them significantly more successful. If you have a young indigenous person who isn't comfortable with who they are as a person, and they go to school and are singled out as the indigenous person in school, or conversations come up, there is a huge struggle there. For a lot of friendship centres, when you are working with young people, that is a huge piece of everything that is developed: what are the traditional practices; what are your traditional histories?

We have young people in friendship centres who are the ones presenting to high schools, businesses, or community groups about who they are as indigenous people, what that looks like, some of the history, and some of the current pieces. I think all of us sometimes get caught up in as though indigenous people were something of the past. We don't talk about the modern indigenous person and what that looks like. Focusing on and making sure culture is integrated into everything that young people do at friendship centres is really important.

The reason I got involved with the National Association of Friendship Centres was that, at their annual assembly, one-third of the vote is young people. One-third of the voting power at our national AGM is young people. You can't proxy a youth vote. It has to be a young person. We take that piece very seriously. We know that there is a huge correlation, that when young aboriginal people, indigenous people, are really confident in who they are and in their culture, it makes a huge difference.

There are plenty of examples. When young people are involved in social enterprises, they tend to want to take a cultural piece to it. One example in British Columbia is of a chocolate business. Part of having the chocolate is reading traditional folklore on the box, some of the legends that are really important to them. Young people create candle businesses that have traditional medicines used with them. All these things have that lens because a lot of these young people have worked very hard to reconnect with who they are.

● (1645)

Mr. David Yurdiga: I have one more question, and then I will let Cathy take the next question.

The Chair: You have four minutes left.

Mr. David Yurdiga: Oh, good.

Are there any solutions or best practices to integrate a culture-based approach to mental health and suicide prevention?

Mr. Christopher Sheppard: I think it is about realizing that there is a place for a clinical side and there is a place for a traditional and cultural side, and that those things don't have to be separate.

We have examples where friendship centres' programs or their mental health programs are preferred to a clinical option. It is hard enough for an aboriginal person to walk into a hospital. Can you imagine the barrier to walking into, say, a mental health emergency room? Because they don't feel confident, or comfortable, or understood, they will more likely walk into a friendship centre to talk about those things.

There is a clinical side and there is a cultural side, and those things should work together. A lot of friendship centres do this with a bunch of different programs. There need to be respect and understanding of both, and that you can do both. They are not mutually exclusive.

We have seen programs where there are aboriginal patients in hospitals and friendship centre staff working in those hospitals, or friendship centres that have clinics. The cultural piece is respected and understood, whether you want to smudge or you want to do a cultural ceremony, but realizing that there is an opportunity for the clinical piece, too, and that there can be spaces for those things to happen and they could be amazing.

To sit across from someone who understands you as an indigenous person and still understands some of the mental health or suicide prevention pieces is huge, instead of walking into a hospital and hoping that someone is not going to ask you a horrible question. I think some of the best practices are that they can coexist. The clinical work and cultural work can coexist, and that is great.

The Chair: You have two minutes at that point right there, if you would like to switch. Sorry to cut you off.

Mrs. Cathy McLeod: Thank you, Chair. We can share very equally.

The Mental Health Commission of Canada was given the task of adapting, I guess, the mental health first aid program to be much more culturally sensitive. I appreciate that every community is different, and you need to hit that balance between the community needs versus maybe some good, standardized program support that works.

Have you had any involvement with that particular initiative?

Mr. Christopher Sheppard: I have some experience with mental health first aid, but not in its adaptation. I think there should be space, because we all know certain things have to be standardized and we need to be able to do certain things. I think an important thing is looking at what Yancy said, that it's not so restricted that on the ground you can't adapt it within a margin to make sure it meets the needs. We have seen this with other programs and even with cultures. There are so many unique, indigenous cultures in this country. I try to explain to people that when we develop programs sometimes, it's a matter of asking what it means for an Inuit person, for a Mi'kmaq, for a Métis person. It's to have the ability to adapt and be flexible enough to change it should you need to, but at the end of the day, the development is there.

One thing I always try to remind people about when we're culturally adapting things is the importance of going back to the basics. What makes mental health first aid important? What makes that successful? Are there any core pieces of it that may need to be adjusted?

Mrs. Cathy McLeod: I guess to date none of the friendship centres have been involved with that process.

Mr. Yancy Craig: We've been involved at national policy discussions in the development of the strategy with the commission, but perhaps not at the individual friendship centres.

Mrs. Cathy McLeod: [*Inaudible—Editor*] in your—

The Chair: We're out of time, Cathy.

Mrs. Cathy McLeod: Oh, really?

The Chair: I'm so sorry. Yes. Take it up with David.

A final question from Niki Ashton, please.

● (1650)

Ms. Niki Ashton: Thank you.

Obviously, as you well know, the point of this study is to come up with some pretty robust recommendations to prevent suicide among indigenous people in communities.

One issue I know from back home that often either gets talked about in other ways or gets overlooked in part because the immediate needs are so significant, the crisis response is so critical, is the need to tackle poverty.

I'm wondering if you could speak in a way that obviously we can pull from that a recommendation. How important is it to tackle poverty when we're talking about the end goal of ending suicide and putting an end to suicide epidemics? What could we be doing about that, perhaps, particularly in the context of urban centres and urban indigenous communities?

Mr. Christopher Sheppard: Poverty comes in so many different shapes and forms. Urban indigenous people and, say, homelessness, unless you are in a shelter, is almost an invisible problem, because they're probably on a friend's couch or somewhere else and they may not have sustainable housing.

There are so many facets to the poverty piece and suicide. It's really hard to tackle poverty when you talk to a person and tell them to get a job. Well, telling someone to look for a job is one thing, but how do you get a job when you have multiple barriers? You have a criminal record; you don't have a lot of training, and you may have other barriers. It comes down to why we do things the way we do them. Why do we offer transportation? Why do we have a homeless shelter? Why do we offer youth programming, day care, or whatever we need to offer? It's because it's so challenging for an indigenous person to get.... When an average Canadian walks into, say, an employment centre, they fill out their information and get some support, get some training. An aboriginal or indigenous person will not walk into an organization where they don't feel safe and start disclosing all these things, “I'm homeless. I don't have my children. My children were taken away. I have an addiction. I have a criminal record”. They're not going to tell just anyone that.

When we look at an individual, we say that suicide is an immediate risk, so it's an immediate thing you have to solve. But so are glasses, so is being able to see, so is not having your medication, and so is not having food to put on your table. There are all these things. We try to tackle them one at a time and meet the immediate risk there. Poverty is real.

Poverty for indigenous people in urban centres is a real thing. We see it every day. It's why friendship centres have food banks. It's why we have clothing that people can pick up. It's why we have homeless shelters. You see it, and it's real.

We talk about how hard it is to get housing. Well, add in everything else. Good luck getting a credit check for an apartment. Good luck passing some of those pieces. I've had people denied housing when they responded yes when asked if they are aboriginal. They were told, “Well, actually, the damage deposit is now twice that, and you have to provide this much more, because I'm not sure if I can rent to you.”

You have all these huge things that make up the poverty piece that is about how to offer as many things as you can. It's why friendship centres have become so innovative in offering day care, transportation, help to get a job, and whatever it takes. Sometimes you can't even refer an aboriginal person to another service provider, because they probably won't go. They might go if you go with them. It's no different from them walking into a hospital, because they're at immediate risk of dying by suicide, and being lucky if they aren't handed a piece of paper and told to call the numbers on it.

Poverty is more than not making enough money. It's the combination of all those things that we see every day.

It's really challenging to explain that to a lot of people, because people think of poverty as the person sitting on the street. Someone seems like they might have everything they need, but they don't. They're not able to provide for themselves or their family, and that's a reality.

Okay, it takes a healthy person, a job, resources, and somewhere to sleep. That's what I mean. When you're constantly dealing with somewhere to sleep, something to eat, being able to see.... You know, it's crazy to think that you have clients who can't even see because they can't get glasses. That is a real barrier. Suicide is an immediate risk factor. Housing is an immediate risk factor. There are all these things.

Infrastructure is a huge thing, but it's not just about saying, “Here's a house.” That's like saying, “Here's a job.” At friendship centres we can get you a job any day, and that's awesome. However, it's what happens from 5:00 in the evening until 9:00 the next morning, or with your family, or with other concerns. You need the ability to provide those supports. Do you have someone you can call 24 hours a day, because if you're not going to make it to work tomorrow, you'll lose your job, lose your housing, and it goes on, one after the next.

For us it's don't just provide the money. That's like saying, “Here's the money to buy a car without money to maintain it,” or, “Here's the money to open a youth centre without money to run it.” Poverty is like that.

● (1655)

Yes, it would be great to have the infrastructure money to do that, but you also need the money to provide the services that support people until they're able to do it themselves.

Mr. Yancy Craig: From a policy perspective, focusing on supporting labour market development for friendship centres not currently delivering outside of Ontario aboriginal labour market programming from the federal government.... Also, this affects a lot of charities' ability to have a for-profit enterprise. A lot of friendship centres are working on social enterprise, creating own-source revenue while creating jobs for multi-barriered clients. That's something at the national level, and with a lot of friendship centres we're trying through our indigenous innovation summit to build that field of indigenous social enterprise and social innovation.

Ms. Niki Ashton: Thank you.

The Chair: We've come to the end.

Mr. Sheppard and Mr. Craig, thanks so much for travelling from near and far to be with us today and for sharing your experience and knowledge so compellingly. It will be very constructive for us as we move ahead with this very important study.

Thank you so much.

Mr. Christopher Sheppard: Thank you.

The Chair: We will suspend for about two minutes and then come back in camera.

[*Proceedings continue in camera*]