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Chair

Mr. Andy Fillmore

Standing Committee on Indigenous and Northern Affairs

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● (1530)

[*English*]

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

Welcome, everyone.

I'll mention that Yvonne Jones, the parliamentary secretary to the Minister of Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada, is with us today, as is Hunter Tootoo, the member from Nunavut.

Welcome to you both.

Joël Lightbound is sitting in today for Rémi Massé, and Alistair MacGregor is sitting in for Charlie Angus, so we have some different faces around the table today.

Welcome to you all.

I'll begin by acknowledging that we're meeting today on traditional Algonquin territory and we're very thankful for that, as we are at every meeting.

We have two panels today. In the first hour we're welcoming Leave Out Violence Nova Scotia Society with three representatives of that organization. I'd like to introduce you to Sarah MacLaren, the executive director; Shurenda Michael, a youth leader with LOVE; and Richard Taylor, operations manager.

I'll review the rules. We're happy to have you speak for up to ten minutes. When we get to about nine minutes, I'm going to show a yellow card, which means we're nearing the end. The red card means to please try to get to your point as quickly as possible and then we'll get to the questions.

I'll use the same cards for questions from committee members, which are also timed.

With that, I'm happy to give you the floor to share the ten minutes amongst yourselves as you see fit.

Ms. Shurenda Michael (Youth Leader, Leave Out Violence Nova Scotia Society): Hello.

My Name Is Shurenda Michael. I'm from Shubenacadie. I am a third-year university student at Saint Mary's.

This meeting is important to me today, because at 12 years old, I told my family I wanted to kill myself. My mom reacted saying, “I'll kill you before you kill yourself”. That was the reaction on her part. Later that day my grandfather, who was in the RCMP at the time, came home, and they said, “You have to break it to him.” I said, “Okay.” I broke it to him and I said, “I want to kill myself.” He said, “What's your plan?” I was 12 at the time and I said, “I don't have a plan; I just feel pain.” He said, “When? Why?” and he asked me all the questions and communicated with me, and it was important for me to realize that it wasn't only me who was going through this. He said, “Rough day on a job, family arguments.” He thought the same. It astonished me, and I couldn't believe that someone who was so respectable in my eyes and so strong was broken too. It wasn't just me.

Another reason this is so close to me is that my mom lost her best friend when she was 22 years old—she had just had me—to suicide. She didn't know that 19 years later I would go through the same thing and lose a friend. She always asked herself why and what she could have done. She always beat herself up about it.

It's an intergenerational thing in these communities. It's not just one generation; it's not just my generation. This was 20 years ago when she lost her best friend, and then I lost a close friend of mine to this.

The thing I find important is leaving that stigma at the door, because the stigma of, “Oh, you're just having a bad day, not a bad life” doesn't let you explain, and there's a lot of, “You're the problem of it all” and “You want to break everyone else down” when really you don't; you just want help. You want to be able to tell people. When my mom told me that she was going to kill me before I killed myself, I felt like a bigger mistake.

My father wasn't in my life, so my mom called my father before my grandfather stepped up. I asked him, “Why weren't you there for me?” He said, “I don't know.” He didn't have an answer for me. At 12 years old that made me feel like I was a mistake to my father, and that hurt me even more. When my grandfather hugged me and told me, “It's okay. I've felt this way too” and he communicated with me, it made me feel like it wasn't only me going through this. Opening that door and being able to communicate that you aren't the only one going through this made me able to....

I know I go through it every now and then because I'm in university and I let my anxiety and depression eat me every now and then to this day, but there are different ways I can reach out now. I have the support of the LOVE program and different supports now.

That's what I have to say.

The Chair: Thank you so much, Shurenda.

There's lots of time remaining, Sarah or Richard.

Mr. Richard Taylor (Operations Manager, Leave Out Violence Nova Scotia Society): Thank you, Shurenda.

I was told that if you commit suicide, you go to hell. I was told that if you commit suicide, you can go into limbo. I was told this by the Catholic school that I went to, which is Lester B. Pearson Catholic High School on Jasmine Crescent here in Ottawa. At home, my mother was very fearful that I, my family members, my brothers and sisters, she, her husband, would some day somehow end up in hell. She was taught that from her mother. She was taught that from the Indian day boarding school. Fear was the mechanism to teach, so the moment that I got out of line there was fear. The moment that my brothers and sisters got out of line, there was fear. My mother loves me, and my mother loves my brothers and sisters. She loves her grandchildren. She lives now with regret.

The effects of Indian residential school, and to a greater extent an overall Eurocentric societal model, transcend much of what we deal with today, because it's been going on for 500 years.

I work with kids now and I have been working with them for many years. I see all the symptoms. I see those who are fragmented. I see those who have incarceration issues, those who may have lost family members to violent ends, including suicide. It is my hope that through the sharing and telling of their stories, under their terms and gently, over time, they in effect are healing by virtue of unpacking the traumatic experiences they have undergone.

I hope this committee will consider that in their processes. The healing is in the story. The story is in the individual. Collateral healing can happen at a community level.

Welálin. Thank you.

● (1535)

Ms. Sarah MacLaren (Executive Director, Leave Out Violence Nova Scotia Society): Hello. I'm the least credible voice amongst my people here. The only reason I get to sit here today is that people have been kind enough and generous enough to teach me, so I want to acknowledge my teachers.

I'll make three really quick points. You can ask me about them when my minutes are up.

One, for those of us who are members of the dominant class—the white, privileged class—if we want to do this work with any integrity, we must humble ourselves. We are used to dominating spaces, the economy, language, and conversations. We are used to it. We will not be effective if we walk into spaces with that attitude. It requires humility. To build a partnership with trust, we have to humble ourselves and become listeners and learners.

Two, I just want to speak to politics. This issue is too important.

I'm sorry but I'm really distracted by your side chit-chat. I don't mean to be rude; I just can't handle it.

Whatever is decided by this committee cannot fall victim to party politics. It is more important than one party's term in office. It is more important than whoever comes next. If Ottawa can't agree across party lines then you're in trouble, because the solution is going to take so much time, commitment, and persistence, that everyone has to agree on what you're going to do. It's more important than what party you support or belong to. People are dying.

Third, I say this to you who are funders. I think that at the end of the day there will be a decision on how you spend your money to address this problem. You need to do something radically different from what has been done. It is time to get some creative brains involved in the process to determine how you're going to spend your money. Anyone who runs a not-for-profit knows that the money goes to the best grant writer. The money goes to the person who knows how to do it best. It doesn't always penetrate into the community.

The solution to this problem is in relationships. It is deeply human. A bureaucratic approach is not going to be successful. You need the money to get to the elder who's feeding five children because they're hungry. You need the money to get to the guy who's running the sweat lodge so he can buy wood to run his sweat lodge. You need the money to penetrate into the community, and that requires a creative approach to how you fund.

That's all I have to say. Thank you for hearing me.

● (1540)

The Chair: Thank you very much, each of you, for your testimony. We will move right into rounds of questions from the members.

The first question today is from Michael McLeod.

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

Thank you to the presenters. I apologize for being a little bit late.

We just returned from visiting a number of communities in the north. Kuujjuaq was one of them, as was Iqaluit. I'm from the Northwest Territories, and we've been discussing the suicide crisis going on in our communities. We figure that in Yukon, Nunavut, the Northwest Territories, Nunavik, and Labrador in the last 15 years, well over 1,000 people have committed suicide.

When we talk about solutions, they raise things like housing and overcrowding as being huge issues. I think a number of the organizations that presented to us stated that it would probably solve 50% of the problems if we could deal with the housing issue.

It was also stated that we need to fix the people who went through the residential schools. The children are saying, “Fix our parents.”

The economy, of course, is something else that is really lacking. A healthy economy that provides jobs, employment, and training is just non-existent in those areas.

I'm not familiar with your part of the country, so I want to ask you what factors and circumstances you think are contributing to youth experiencing a sense of despair or mental health problems. Is it depression? Is it anxiety? Could you talk a little bit about that?

Ms. Shurenda Michael: Our issues are pretty much the same as those in the north. There's a community in Cape Breton right now that has brown water because their water tank hasn't been fixed, so people aren't able to cook with their water or shower. Then there is housing. This is my personal aspect; we had three generations in one house before. We had about 17 people in my house, in a two-bedroom house with a basement. This was when I was about 12, so this was about the time when I was ready to end my life. It's a lot about jobs too. In Eskasoni—they are about an hour away from town—if you don't have a vehicle or a licence, how are you supposed to have a job, if you can't get to the job?

How are you supposed to do this when you're isolated? How are you supposed to talk to people when your elders have gone through residential schools and they don't know how to talk about things? I know my grandfather used to tell me my father never talked about things and he went through the residential school. Somehow my grandfather went through programs and stuff. I know when he was growing up with my mom.... My mom said "you saw a different man than I did, you saw the healed man in front of us today. I got the broken man." She had a lot of resentment about her dad being a father to me instead of the father he was to her. It's a lot of that too. It's the same down there. My community is about 20 minutes from Truro and an hour from Halifax, but we still can't get anywhere because we're put in these spots where we feel isolated. Our community couldn't even get an exit off the highway. It takes 20 minutes to get onto the highway from my community, when there could have been an exit right at the overpass and it would take only five minutes.

● (1545)

Mr. Michael McLeod: Thank you for that response.

It's interesting how we're spread all over the country as aboriginal people, but we have so many of the same challenges. The communities in my riding are next door to a diamond mine, yet most people can't find a way to get to work because it's three hours away. It's only women who can get to work because all the men can't pass the criminal records check. They all have criminal records from when they were young and they can't get them dealt with. It takes 10 years to deal with a criminal record, to get a pardon.

One of the things we heard about regarding the communities of Kuujjuaq and Iqaluit was the need for crisis centres, family centres, and cultural centres. I keep thinking about that recommendation, but I also look at what we have already in all parts of Canada, which is the friendship centre program. In Nunavut, I think there's only one, so it's not so much there. Is there such a facility or program in your community that could deliver programs of sport, culture, language, or issues of mental health if it were well-resourced?

Mr. Richard Taylor: Within the city of Halifax, there is the Mi'kmaw Friendship Centre, which runs an array of programs for the aboriginal population in Halifax. Within the community of Sipekne'katik where LOVE operates our programs, we have a youth coordinator who runs a number of various activities for the youth in the community. There is consistency there. This is a position that has only recently been created and it has been quite successful. She accesses the gym and has a number of events happening at the gym. Our largest complaint from our youth is that there aren't things happening on the weekends. It's on the weekends when the most terrible things happen. When kids are left to their own means, they often find themselves doing things like partying, drinking, and so on and so forth. There you have it. It's one component of a larger picture.

I would like to touch on the previous question. If we have a child who has suffered traumatic experience from the time they are born, if, say, they suffer from fetal alcohol syndrome, from the moment that child is born, they will contend with issues for their entire life. While they have to deal with that issue from the moment they are born—which they had no choice in—they might also have had a family member who had died or who might have committed suicide or who might be in prison or might have gone missing, and their father is drinking and their mother is drinking, and they live in a house where there are a bunch of kids and families who are all dealing with the same things and they are all self-medicating. Of course there are going to be issues and of course there are going to be problems. Until the trauma is looked at and taken into account, we can not really begin to move forward. I dealt with the trauma in my life by seeking it out in the sweat lodge and by doing the sun dance. That's not for everybody though. Part of the solution has to be looking at that trauma and admitting that the trauma is very real and that the larger society has a role in addressing it.

Thank you.

● (1550)

The Chair: Thanks so much.

The next question is from Arnold Viersen.

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

Thank you to our guests for being here today.

We're hearing repeated things from most of our witnesses. The ITK has put together what is perhaps a nice template of how to proceed. They have the protective factors and the risk factors. We seem to have a fairly clear idea of what is causing this. Two of the things that really jump out for me are cultural continuity and family strength. These are two areas that they've outlined as protective factors; so if your family is intact, if your family members are all in a loving relationship with one another, you're much less likely to be involved in suicide or other risky behaviours.

We seem to have identified the issues; there are a whole host of organizations across the country that are working towards this. I imagine that suicide prevention is just one of the aspects that you deal with, and none of these things happen in a vacuum. Economy, family, and education are all parts of the solution.

Could you elaborate a bit about what your organization is doing to promote strong family ties, to promote cultural continuity, and to promote the local economy in terms of food production?

Ms. Sarah MacLaren: Thank you for the question.

Rich could probably speak to this better than I will in some ways, but I think it's not just what you do; it's who does it. It's equipping people with the skills to do things that need to be done. At LOVE we do basically whatever our kids need from us. Yes, we have a weekly program in which we bring food; we engage in conversation; we engage in conversation that, for the most part, other people are not engaging in with our kids. We talk about things, and our kids will say to us, oh, nobody's ever talked to me about that before; nobody's ever talked to me about my strengths; nobody ever told me I was worthy; nobody ever said those things to me. We create a circle of support amongst a peer group driven by the kids. Now Rich goes for two days a week and he basically responds to what our kids need. This one needs to apply to community college; we know they're not going to do it on their own. This one needs to go to the doctor and get a prescription for whatever. What we found really works is, essentially, not having a cookie-cutter response to anything. It's basically asking individuals what they need, and then providing them with the support to get that, because humans are different.

Mr. Arnold Viersen: That's entirely the case. Everything you've outlined to me up until now seems to say that you're dealing with crisis and crisis and crisis. What I'm more going after is whether you have maybe a longer-term goal, like renewing the culture or renewing family ties, essentially. I know that each individual family deals with a lot of these things in broader Canadian culture—

Ms. Sarah MacLaren: Sorry, I'm interrupting.

Mr. Arnold Viersen: Go ahead; this is a discussion.

Ms. Sarah MacLaren: We're not just dealing with crisis.

Mr. Arnold Viersen: Okay.

Ms. Sarah MacLaren: We're preparing young people to maybe one day sit at a table like this if that's what they want. That's not crisis; that's skill-building; that's confidence-building; that's relationship-building, so they will have that. You handed a card over. Who knows what that may mean to Shurenda one day? You never know. It's those connections and exposures that again, because of isolation, our youth don't have. On the cultural piece, obviously, that is not for me to speak to; that would be more for Rich.

● (1555)

Mr. Richard Taylor: As an example, I believe that Shurenda is here with us, as a young person, from our community, and as Sarah is describing, it's a big deal to her. I don't mean to embarrass her by saying this, but Hunter is somebody she looks up to very much. Here she is in a situation where this can happen, and it might otherwise not happen.

We focus our efforts on trust. Whatever activity or event is happening is secondary to trust, which simply means that.... We might be doing an exercise we call an “F-write”, in which you write whatever you want—“F” standing for what you think it stands for—

Ms. Sarah MacLaren: The kids like that one.

Mr. Richard Taylor: —and it's not about the exercise of writing it down; it's about it being okay for you to write whatever you want. If you have to go to the doctor, it's okay for you to tell me that you have to go to the doctor. I'm going to keep your secrets. We tell our kids there are only three secrets that we can't keep. Those are that you're going to hurt yourself, that you're going to hurt somebody else, or that someone is hurting you. Those are the only times we will break confidence. Our kids are very savvy, because they will tell us things without revealing that it is they themselves who are experiencing it.

So our main focus is trust. I bring kids into a sweat lodge for the very first time. Some of them are scared. Some of them are afraid because it's not Catholic. Our own community members are resistant to the idea of traditionalism. In the Atlantic region, the Catholicism is so strong that it was there and it has stayed. We've been living with it for the longest. Therefore, our own community members will often resist the old traditional ways and that will become ingrained into the children.

I take that and I tell them it's okay; they don't have to go in; they can just come to eat. Because there can't be any more pressure. They don't need any more pressure. They have got enough. They walk with it every day. It's normalized to them. Just because it's normal doesn't mean it's okay. We build trust.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thanks.

Our next question will be from Alistair MacGregor.

Mr. Alistair MacGregor (Cowichan—Malahat—Langford, NDP): Richard and Shurenda, I want to thank you so much for coming to the committee today and for displaying what I think is a very high level courage to let this committee know of what was a very painful moment in both your lives. So thank you for that. I think this committee needs to hear more stories like that, and indeed this whole country does.

Sarah, I really appreciated your words on being humble. My riding sits on the traditional territories of the Cowichan people, and also the Malahat, the Lake Cowichan, and the Songhees and Esquimalt first nations, as part of the Coast Salish network on Vancouver Island. I have participated in a few events. One of them was called Understanding the Village, in which they walked the non-indigenous population through the process of colonization. At the beginning of that, it forced us to be humble to accept what we were about to experience.

Some witnesses have come to this committee and spoken about a national strategy on suicide. I know that national strategies may not always work because there are many different regions in Canada, but I wanted to hear a little bit more from the three of you on what you think some of the potential advantages and maybe disadvantages of implementing a national suicide prevention strategy would be.

Ms. Sarah MacLaren: We know them the disadvantages. The people in this room probably knows them better than most people do. Our country is made up of different areas. Where you live isn't the same as where I live. Our communities need to feel as though—I'll just speak really bluntly—the government isn't taking a cookie-cutter approach to their individual communities. I think the potential disadvantage is that if you walk down a path and it's the wrong one and nothing gets solved, you further isolate already isolated and disenfranchised communities and you also let some of the dominant, ignorant members of the public say "we threw another $500 million at it and it wasn't solved. What are we going to try now?"

The danger is that you cannot do something customized on a national level. I would say that is your biggest challenge. How do you roll out a national project that allows for individualism and that communities can own?

● (1600)

Mr. Richard Taylor: I agree with Sarah, in the sense that in Michael's community and in Eskasoni, and in Sipekne'katik, where Shurenda and I are from, while we experience the same sorts of trauma and the communities are responding in the same ways, the solution is not necessarily going to be the same.

Perhaps in Michael's community they still speak their language. Perhaps in my community many people are still traditional. In the Mohawk communities, they still are very tied to their old and traditional ways. In Sipekne'katik and in Mi'kma'ki, it is not like that: we are regularly attempting to return to our old ways.

Determining which factors are causing the greatest amount of trauma would be difficult when trying to employ a solution on a national scale. This is not to say that a national scale is not a possibility, because, as we see with the government and with the various tribes here in Canada, in some cases it applies to one tribe, and in other cases it does not apply. In Nova Scotia, we have a certain gas tax, and in New Brunswick that gas tax is not there, yet both nations, both tribes, are the same. We are Mi'kma'ki.

The government has perhaps inadvertently—hopefully inadvertently, although the pattern would suggest otherwise—caused dissension among the tribes themselves by offering certain things to one and other things to others, taking away things from some, and so on and so forth.

A national-scale solution can be applied only after all of the necessary rocks have been turned over at the local level, in order to finally be able to define what it is that can help and can work, with perhaps a range or a scale of possibilities within a national program, but the people themselves, aboriginal people, must be dealt with as one with the government. I firmly believe—and this is strictly my own belief—that we should indeed be viewed as one, because if we're not viewed as one, that's where we get into problems when one tribe is given something but there's nothing for another.

Mr. Alistair MacGregor: Thank you for that, Richard. It goes back to what you said in your testimony. What works for you may not work for everyone, and it's a sort of a balancing of this collective action with individual needs.

In the short time you have, can you talk a bit about some of the best practices that LOVE has employed? I know that a lot of it is built on trust, but in this last bit of time, can you expand a little on some of the best practices?

Ms. Sarah MacLaren: I'm going to dare to be flaky. Our best practice is to be human. Our best practice is to not be constrained by many of the constraints that other people who work with youth have. We hug our kids. We tell our kids we love them. We are on call to our kids 24-7.

We go to conferences with other youth service providers. They look at us like we are chickens with our heads cut off, because we don't operate in a climate of fear. We work with some very high-risk kids and we engage in behaviour that many people who work with young people would consider high risk, but we believe that's the way you need to work to get the job done.

Our best practice is to be human.

I'm sorry. That's probably not very helpful, but that's what we do.

● (1605)

Mr. Alistair MacGregor: That's fine. Thank you for that.

The Chair: Thanks.

Our next question is from Gary Anandasangaree.

Mr. Gary Anandasangaree (Scarborough—Rouge Park, Lib.): Thanks to all three of you for joining us this afternoon.

I worked quite extensively with youth prior to my entry into politics, so I want to probe a few things with you. I completely agree with you that when you serve youth, you really can't have barriers, and oftentimes a lot of the challenge is that you have an ending point, and then there's no one else to take over. You almost need to have a holistic look at somebody's life in order to serve them properly.

With respect to the criminal justice system, I'd like to know about the type of work you do and what you think is working for the youth you're working with. What are some of the challenges? What are some of the structural challenges that exist in the criminal justice system for indigenous people? The numbers are just astounding with respect to incarceration of adults, and this oftentimes starts with youth. Could you give us a very brief overview of what you think works right now?

Mr. Richard Taylor: Could you clarify the question, please? Do you mean with regard to the criminal justice system and what our experience is with it?

Mr. Gary Anandasangaree: In your program, what works? What's something that works in your community that could potentially be used in other communities?

Ms. Shurenda Michael: I would say it's not giving up on people. I'll tell you right now that when I started with Sarah and I got mad, I used to walk away and think that she was never going to see me again. The next week I'd come, and she'd hug me again.

I've been in programs in my own community in which I've been bullied and they've given up on me, and I thought, okay, this person isn't my own. She's not a relative of mine. She's going to give up on me. It's been eight or nine years now. Just don't give up on people.

Ms. Sarah MacLaren: Again, people don't like our answers because they want to be able to say, “How do I write that down? How do I roll out a national strategy around caring for young people?”

Time limits are doing a great disservice to our young people. If yo have programs that run short-term projects, let them go. If you want to address long-term systemic programs, stop running six-month theatre projects in communities that let the theatre runner make $20,000 and the community have a play, and nothing else.

Run long-term programs. If you want to know one thing that is working for lowering recidivism, that's one thing that's working. Another thing that's working, I think, is that, again, we allow our youth to make their mistakes and come back. We go to court with our youth. Our criminal justice system is racist. I'm sorry, I hate to use the word here today, but it is. I sometimes call myself the white shield. I put my little blazer on and I'm like, “Look, I am with this kid.” It makes a difference. We hate to think it makes a difference, but it makes a difference.

Mr. Gary Anandasangaree: Sarah, could you maybe just probe that? Do you believe that the factors that are used towards release, with respect to mitigation, are problematic when they're applied to specific communities?

Ms. Sarah MacLaren: Do you mean factors in terms of giving someone back their freedom?

Mr. Gary Anandasangaree: Yes, in terms of sentencing, in terms of a whole host of—

Ms. Sarah MacLaren: When we work with young people here, one of the biggest problems we encounter is breaching of conditions. If a kid commits a crime under the Young Offenders Act, and then they breach their conditions but they've turned 18 in the meantime, now they have an adult charge for a breach on what was originally a young-adult charge, and, as your esteemed colleague mentioned, now they have no job, because they're 18 and they have a criminal charge. It might not even have been a big offence; it was just they missed curfew or they didn't have their phone on when they were supposed to.

When it comes to release, I think the biggest challenge for anyone is having systems in place to support, to heal, and to care about their re-entry. I have picked up young people from incarcerated situations, and all they had was a bus ticket. Good luck.

● (1610)

Mr. Gary Anandasangaree: Thank you. You mentioned earlier at some point that your grandfather was healed from the time that your mom grew up to the time that you were growing up. What does that mean in real terms?

Ms. Shurenda Michael: Are you asking how he healed?

Mr. Gary Anandasangaree: What helped him heal?

Ms. Shurenda Michael: What happened with him was that, before I was born—and he admitted this to me—when he was growing up, he was a bad alcoholic because his father couldn't communicate with him. He was a bad alcoholic. He would chase alcohol all over the community. He told me this, and when my mother was growing up, that's what he was. He was the father who was the alcoholic. So my gran told him straight up that either he had to get sober or she and the kids were gone.

He chose his family over alcohol. It was tough, but he did it. When he died, he was 30 years sober. That's a big thing. People don't realize that we didn't always have alcohol; it was brought over to us. There's a lot of alcoholism in the communities, and a lot of people won't admit to their problems, but he did, and then he started communicating as he got older.

The Chair: All right, we're finished there.

Thank you for the question and for the response.

We're going to move into the five-minute questions. These move a little more quickly, and we can fit more of them in now, so that's the good thing.

The first five-minute question is from David Yurdiga.

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

Richard, Shurenda, and Sarah, thank you for joining us today. Your input is very valuable to our committee, and we want to make things better through programming. We heard a lot about programming. What has been the most successful program in your organization to date? They are all important, but what was the one that made the biggest impact for youth?

Ms. Sarah MacLaren: We pretty much run one model anywhere we go, so our program operates on the same premises. I would say we run two in-school programs. I think our most successful programs are programs that are not associated with another institution. We can play by our own rules, and the kids who come to all of our programs come voluntarily. Basically, in our philosophy and our model, we don't really run.... We used to run a federal employability program, but that one got the chop. Other than that, we run the same thing everywhere we go. We just adapt it. So if it's for junior high school boys, we decide what would be important for us to talk about with them. We'll say, “Oh, Rich, we're coming to Sipekne'katik. How do we need to change our program and what we talk about in our circle?” However, our model and our philosophy, frankly, are what matter.

Shurenda, you have experienced both.

Ms. Shurenda Michael: I started from grade 7, the junior high level. Then I went to the high school, went to the leadership of Sipekne'katik. Then I moved to Halifax for university, and it's pretty much the same aroma. When I was 15 in the LOVE program, one of my bullies from when I was about 10 apologized to me without any of us asking him. He just straight-up was like, “I'm sorry I hurt you when you were younger,” and I was like, “Okay, thanks.” It meant a lot. It's the same aroma around the different programs, because I've gone from Sipekne'katik to the leadership program in Halifax.

Mr. Richard Taylor: The philosophy is trust because, as human beings, when we're born we intrinsically trust the body from which we're born. We inherently trust that. Once that trust is violated, that's when we run into problems. For many of our youth, regardless of whether they're in Halifax or in HRM or in Cape Breton—which is four hours away—or in Sipekne'katik, trust is the one thing that ties all of them together. They all have trust issues. Each of them has had their trust violated, and that is no small thing. A violation of trust is very traumatic.

● (1615)

Mr. David Yurdiga: Thank you.

Another thing we heard from a number of our witnesses was that for these grants that each community has to apply for, a lot of times it takes so long to go through the grant process. Then you have such a narrow window in which to spend the money. Has this been a major challenge for your organization, receiving these grants and trying to spend them?

Ms. Sarah MacLaren: To be honest, I don't even apply for federal money anymore; it's too limiting. It doesn't allow us to work in the way we know is effective.

Rich and I had a conversation, and I said, “Don't worry if we offend them because we don't get any of their money now, and we may never. It's okay, buddy.” It really is limiting if you want to create long-term solutions. I really don't mean to offend anyone, but this is just the reality we're operating in. For a one-year grant, it takes eight months to find out if you're going to get it. Then you get one year, and your year-end is March 31. You want me to waste money? That's not our culture. We are penny-pinchers. We are fiscally very responsible. Then your program officer is calling and saying, “Well, you have to spend $6,000” and I say, “Why do I have to spend $6,000? We could do something next month with this. Let me keep it. I saved it because I was smart.”

Yes, it's very detrimental to good work.

Mr. David Yurdiga: Thank you.

The Chair: Thanks very much.

The next question is from Joël Lightbound.

Mr. Joël Lightbound (Louis-Hébert, Lib.): First of all, I want to thank you all for being here. I think it takes a lot of courage to testify in front of a committee like this, and we appreciate it. I thank you for your presence here with us.

My first question would be to you, Shurenda. Can you walk us through what brought you to reach out to LOVE in the first place, and how it's helped you concretely in your life as you entered the organization and worked with the organization? I'd like you to share your feelings, as someone who's gone through it.

Ms. Shurenda Michael: As I said, my father wasn't there when I was born, and my mother and I butted heads a lot. I referred to her as “the wave”: in and out. She's given up on me a lot. I wanted to find a place where I could trust, and when they said “there are three secrets and then anything else stays in that room”, I thought, “okay, I'll give it a month. We'll push buttons here. We'll see.” My friends and I thought, “Yeah, maybe”, but honestly, we sat in that room and nothing came out of that room after it went in. We all realized, sitting around in a circle, that we all were broken. We all needed to be fixed, and we needed to trust someone.

When I was 15, my biggest bully from when I was 10 apologized to me without anyone asking him to or anything. He realized, “Oh, I bullied you because I was broken. I didn't realize. You were that rich kid. Your grandfather was a cop. I didn't realize your parents did what they did to you.” It took time to build the relationships that I did with my fellow youth who were in the LOVE program with me, but that's what kept us. We thought, “Oh, it's not just me causing the problem at home, where people are yelling at me for no reason.” To us it was no reason. It probably was no reason, but it's not just me going through it. The kid down the road's going through it too, and they get everything they want. That's the trust thing. We're all saying we need to learn how to leave something at the door, and leave it in the room if someone wants it left in the room.

● (1620)

Mr. Joël Lightbound: Thank you.

This question would be more to Richard and Sarah.

I guess it happens, in the course of your work, that you lose a kid who walks away from the program. What resources would be needed to avoid that, if it happens? How can we avoid that, so they stay the course with you? What are your thoughts on that?

Ms. Sarah MacLaren: We don't lose a lot of kids. We have retention rates in the 90th percentile. Part of that is being voluntary and giving our kids a choice. We're renowned. We're at your doorstep saying, “Hi, are we going to see you Tuesday?” These are the days of texting and Facebook. We are diligent human beings.

Every now and then a kid walks away, and that's okay, because you can't be everything to all people. If we're hitting the 90th percentile mark, I think we're doing all right in that regard.

You know what? Sometimes they come back. Our kids opt out. Sometimes we've had kids who once they learn our values, and they've been around awhile, want to be role models. They know our thing is you're supposed to be a role model to the other kids. If they aren't being role models, they will actively separate themselves from us until they're walking a different path, and then they'll come back. It's very rare that we lose a kid.

What do you think, Richard?

Mr. Richard Taylor: Our appeal is, I think, that we say we're for 16- to 18-year-olds, but really it's 12- to 26-year-olds. There are kids in their 30s who still call Sarah, just to say hi, from Vancouver—we have one of our folks here from Vancouver. The conversation is often simply, “how are things going? It's nice that things are changing. It's nice that you're doing this. It's nice that you're enrolled in something. It's nice that you're at work. It's nice to hear that you have a lovely child in your life and you have a wonderful family burgeoning”, and all these sorts of things. For many of these young people, things are happening late.

For us, our retention has to do with having a broad appeal. When a young person does what I'll call self-eviction, it's because they see what's going on and says, “You know what? Maybe I don't need this. Maybe I thought I needed it, but I don't.” Then they move on. They find themselves a job. They'll be doing drywall work or something, and they'll come by and say hi. They'll be happy when they see us. That's what it's about: broad appeal.

Mr. Joël Lightbound: Do I have time?

The Chair: Thank you for the response.

You're out of time.

We have time for one more five-minute question, and that is from Cathy McLeod.

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

Thank you both for your very compelling testimony today and for the work that you do.

I was looking at your website, and it seems this is a model.

Ms. Sarah MacLaren: We're a not-for-profit, so we don't have the best of websites.

Mrs. Cathy McLeod: First of all, I appreciate your comments about how sometimes federal programs can be very confining and about the time you have to spend on applications. Rather than being offended, we probably agree to some degree that there are ways in which we could perhaps make them a little more flexible and a little more responsive and timely.

I'm trying to understand something. You have different branches in different communities. How did the model evolve? You talk about a 98% retention rate. Do you have shareable evaluations? Tell me a little more about your organization.

Ms. Sarah MacLaren: Our organization was started by a woman whose husband was murdered by a 14-year-old boy in Montreal. She started it in Montreal in 1995 in partnership with a journalism professor and a photography professor. In 1997, they got a grant to expand to Toronto. I probably sound very ungrateful. The government has done nice things for us. They got a millennium grant and expanded to Vancouver and Halifax. We had a central governance body realize it was broken about two years ago. Every region is now incorporated individually, so each region runs according to what they feel their community's needs are. We have a basic program model with an intake-level program, a leadership program, and outreach. Because we are more philosophy-based than curriculum-based, it's really a question of how things apply to our community and how do we want them to work?

Does that make sense?

The model itself evolved. They started doing journalism with kids and then realized that, wow, these kids have really important stories, and we need to have their stories heard. Then they took them out, and they realized that maybe kids need leadership training before they can go out in the world and share their stories. Now we have a leadership training model, and we have an outreach model whereby our young people educate youth-serving professionals or other young people about the root causes and solutions to violence.

Mrs. Cathy McLeod: Is there an evaluation process?

Ms. Sarah MacLaren: We had an evaluation conducted by McGill five years ago, which is available. In Nova Scotia, we just partnered with the Dalhousie School of Social Work, and four of their master's students conducted an evaluation for us last year. I have the results here in an annual report if you want to see them. We absolutely believe in being accountable and being evaluated and making sure that we aren't just doing pie in the sky and thinking that because our kids hug us, we're doing great work. We understand that's not a good measure of whether we're doing good work or not.

● (1625)

Mrs. Cathy McLeod: You indicated that you don't apply for government grants. I looked at your huge sponsor list. Are you having to go through processes with every organization every year, or are you on their list of organizations they support every year so you can run your programs?

Ms. Sarah MacLaren: Each region raises its own budget to run its programs. Our budget in Nova Scotia, right now is around the $460,000 mark. I raise that every year. That's my job.

Mr. Richard Taylor: In short, there are no multi-funders. We have maybe, I think—

Ms. Sarah MacLaren: I think we have three that have signed on for more than one year: United Way, Peter Cundill Foundation, and one other foundation. But generally, we're not. In my next life, I'll get to educate funders.

The Chair: Thank you for that.

Thanks for the question.

We're out of time. It goes really quickly, but what we heard from you is extremely valuable.

Shurenda, thank you so much for being with us today and sharing what you shared, your story.

Richard and Sarah, thank you for coming as well and explaining to us your program and how it works.

Thank you all for a whirlwind day-long trip to Ottawa. I want to ask you to leave the annual report with us if you could. We'll table that as well.

The final thing is that we've created an online portal for this study, and we're trying to spread that as far and wide as we can. Anyone is welcome to leave—we call it a brief, but just say what you want to say—up to about 3,000 words, and Michelle is going to email you the link.

Sarah and Richard, please share that with your people, your kids, as broadly as you want and maybe talk about it with them. There's a really nice opportunity to write. It could be an F-write. We would welcome that. Thanks so much.

We're going to suspend for a couple of minutes.

● (1625)

(Pause)

● (1630)

The Chair: Welcome back.

The second panel of the day is going to be two people. Matthew Glode is appearing as an individual, and Pamela Glode Desrochers is appearing representing the Mi'kmaw Native Friendship Centre in Halifax.

I am happy to offer you each ten minutes, if you would like to use that. That is ten minutes each, and then we will follow with rounds of questions after that.

Do you have a preference about who goes first?

● (1635)

Mrs. Pamela Glode Desrochers (Executive Director , Mi'kmaw Native Friendship Society): I'll start.

The Chair: Okay. Pam, go ahead, please.

Mrs. Pamela Glode Desrochers: My name is Pam Glode Desrochers, and I am the executive director of the Mi'kmaw Native Friendship Centre. We are located in Halifax. I could go on and on about stuff that the friendship centre does and the number of youth who we are engaged with.

Today is actually very emotional for my family. This is about putting a face to suicide. This is about putting a name to suicide. On March 2 my brother's son, my nephew, took his own life, and I'm going to let Matthew tell that story. Then I will make sure that we follow up, and I will definitely assist in answering questions, but this really is about Cody.

Mr. Shawn Matthew Glode (As an Individual): First and foremost, I'd like to thank everybody for having us here.

The opportunity to speak on this issue has become dear and close to my heart. Our communities are in crisis.

My name is Matthew Glode. I'm from Millbrook First Nation, Nova Scotia, and I'm here to talk to you about mental illness.

Our son Cody started his battle with depression at the age of 13. He was a victim of bullying, and bullying wreaks havoc in our communities and in the adolescents' lives. When Cody started to self-harm, little did we know it was the beginning of a long, dark, and lonely road that would end in tragedy. We spoke openly about mental health and sought help immediately, while at the same time attending to our daughter Caitlin, who also started her own battle with depression and mental illness.

For Cody, the course of action was medication, therapy, and martial arts. Martial arts gave him a whole new perspective; it gave him something to really look forward to. He did well in school, avoided the party scene, and spent most of his time in the gym teaching kids martial arts. His self-esteem was once again where it should be—or so we thought.

He graduated from high school. He tried his hand at university and worked part-time. He seemed to have it all, although from time to time he would tell us that he was sad and didn't understand why. We always encouraged and supported him, and he continued to work hard at the gym. He started on new medication and continued therapy. Cody dreamed of becoming a professional MMA fighter. He also began to pursue a career as a firefighter. He graduated from fire school in April 2015, and little did we know that some time prior to the end he stopped taking his medication. When we did approach him, Cody explained that it made him feel worse and that it wasn't working. Someone close to us told us that he had stopped taking it. How do you make a 20-year-old firefighter/fighter take his medication?

On June 15, he was hired full-time with the Truro Fire Service. He was the youngest firefighter ever hired, and the only first nations firefighter ever hired. To say that we were proud would be an understatement.

Cody should have been on top of the world, and, yes, on the outside he appeared to be. He really had it all: a very hopeful future in MMA, a full-time career, a brand new car that he paid cash for, and a beautiful girlfriend he planned to marry. On the inside, Cody was dying a slow, painful death. He didn't want his employer to know. He was reluctant to seek out help right away. Finally, he went to the emergency room and was given completely new medication, and was told to follow up with his family doctor. Although he still didn't want to tell anything to his employer, he did seem to want to battle this illness head-on.

I truly believe that he wanted to live; however, he was exhausted from always pretending to be okay. He told me that he couldn't remember the last time that he'd felt happy—he thought at maybe 11 years old. He couldn't sleep. The pills weren't working. The thoughts in his head grew darker and darker, and so did his writing in his journal.

On March 2, our son Cody took his own life.

Many wonder how such an accomplished young man could do this. He left behind me and my wife of 22 years, his sister, three brothers, a niece, a loving girlfriend, and a large extended family of friends and co-workers alike.

This does not happen to families like mine. This does not happen to someone like Cody. For that matter, it shouldn't happen to any family or any individual.

Mental illness isn't picky; it spares no one. It doesn't matter your race, your age, your upbringing, your education, or your ambitions. It bites and digs its teeth in deep and does not release its prey.

● (1640)

The suicide rate in first nations communities is twice the national average. One would think that with a number like that help would be more readily available, but that's wrong.

Cody went to the doctor. He was told to call. He was given a piece of paper with a name on it. He was told to call to make an appointment with the psychologist. I'd seen Cody lose in the ring. I'd seen him lose in competition, but I'd never ever seen him defeated. When he came home that day, he was defeated. His shoulders were slumped when he found out there was a two-month waiting period to get in to see somebody. He was defeated. I saw a difference in his demeanor then. Two weeks into the two-month wait, Cody took his life. His story was not the first and it will not be the last, as long as this continues.

Would it have changed Cody's outcome if he had gotten in sooner? We don't know, and unfortunately we'll never know. But it may have bought him some time.

For a lot of people suffering from mental illness, who are deep in that pit of despair, making a phone call would be climbing Mount Everest. If Cody had gone into the office with a bump on his head, high sugars, chest pain, or even a broken foot, help would have been immediate. Mental health issues need immediate action. “Mental health” are words that people have to be comfortable with. Our son was not crazy. He did not have bad nerves. He was not lonely. He suffered every day from mental illness. If it had been cancer, there would have been all kinds of help available.

Mental health is lonely and crippling. It kills its victims. We as a nation need to make mental health a household word. We need to put in place a system that saves lives, one that, if need be, holds that person's hand until they get the help they need. We need people there to continue the care even after help has been given and received, whether that be with a simple visit or a phone call, or a person in place who would offer a hug, words of encouragement, or a listening ear. Sometimes it's so simple, but yet crucial to that person on the dark and lonely road of mental illness.

I do know that in that moment when my son could no longer bear his inner pain, he wasn't alone. God, the Creator, reached out and took him in his arms and said, “I've got you. I'm taking you home.”

Welálin. Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Glode.

Pam, would you like to add anything?

Mrs. Pamela Glode Desrochers: Yes, I would, of course.

I've just listened to a young girl say she was broken, and I take great offence at that. I take great offence that this young girl or any of our children feel like they are broken. As a people, we are not broken. The systems are broken and the policies are broken, and that's what needs to change. In our community, whether you're on reserve or in an urban context, we are not broken. The systems are broken. They've been broken. They've been designed to fail us time and time again. I've seen it happen over and over again.

I believe in my heart of hearts that there is a way forward. We talk about reconciliation—everybody throws that word around now—and it's where we need to go. I actually believe that it can be done. I believe that it will take a long time to be done. I believe that it will take us doing things together, not having government do things to our community, but with us, beside us, not in front of us, and not behind us. I believe that those policies need to be joint and they need to be done together.

I believe in my heart that our community can get better. I believe that when society as a whole recognizes.... I heard Richard say it: we need to have understanding of why things are the way they are. Don't hold it against us that our families were put into residential schools or that there was the sixties scoop, or the past and all of those things that created this, like the Indian Act. They've all been created to assimilate and to eradicate the Indian problem, and those are real things.

Those are very real. I believe that when I look at the mental health issues. I am going to go to the friendship centre now, because we know when people come through our door.... Somebody may come in for employment, housing, education, or addiction services. They're all intertwined. It's a social cocktail mix. I don't know what you want to call it, but usually, nine times out of ten—and I'm going to say 99.9% of the time—there are mental health issues, and they all need to be treated together.

People need to be treated with respect. It breaks my heart knowing that out of everything we do, we couldn't even help my own nephew. I questioned what I do because of that. However, I also believe that what happened to Cody, for me, is the changing point even in my life. I believe that something good will come from Cody's passing.

For me, I believe that in the organization, the friendship centre, and our community, we have to start doing things together, not in silos, not separately, and not in Ottawa, but together. We talk about a national strategy. We talk about all these things. The reality is that we have to start doing things together. I don't mean at each other. I mean together. We need to have that honest truthful conversation, and humility has to play a role in that.

I actually love Canada. I don't like some of the history that has happened to our people at all, but I do believe that, moving forward, if we do things together, it can be very different. In our programs at the friendship centre, we try to take mainstream services and incorporate them in our community. I think there's some validity in some of those systems if they can incorporate our systems, our needs, and our wants.

● (1645)

My brother and I have had the conversation. Is medication the answer? Are cultural competencies the answer? I believe things have to be done together. Is it just medication? No. I've had conversations where it's medication, medication, medication. I've seen my other nephew, Matthew's other son, who carries Cody's bundle, take part in those monthly sweats for Cody. Those are healing for him. That is no different from going to the doctor for a bandage, to be quite honest.

Mr. Shawn Matthew Glode: Speaking about that, Christopher was the last one to see Cody alive that night. He bore a lot of weight and a lot of bearing on the outcome. He felt that he was responsible. Through the sweats, and through the cultural aspect of it, it's lifted that weight off of his shoulders. I see a different young man now. He's a different person. He's more confident. He's more at peace. I guess with the medication...I just wish we would have had the opportunity—our community is not big into our language or even into our old ways—and that Cody would have had that experience of the sweat combined with medication and with the counselling. You can only guess at what might have been, but it would have been better than what he had, because he had nothing.

● (1650)

Mrs. Pamela Glode Desrochers: When we talk about policies, I always laugh, because we have community members who go to doctors for different things, but it always has to happen on Monday to Friday between 9:00 a.m. and 5:00 p.m. You know, the reality is that when something big is going on in somebody's life, it's usually in the evenings or Christmastime, or holidays, or weekends. Those are huge crisis points. I don't care if you are aboriginal or non-aboriginal—those times are your worst times, and yet the doctors only want to work from nine to five. I'm not holding that against them. I believe that's policy. I believe that's how the systems are set up. I think we need to re-examine those systems and those policies. That's where you're going to get change. That's where you're going to see a difference for our communities and Canada as a whole, to be honest. Suicide has no boundaries. It affects our communities tremendously. It is the loss of the language, the loss of the cultural pieces, the isolation, the not belonging, the not fitting in, the bullying, and the racism that is experienced. All of those are key components and what our people are faced with.

Many of our people come from first nations communities into the urban context. It's isolation again. Halifax is fortunate enough to have, I think, a pretty strong friendship centre. We're able to provide over 28 programs and services for people, but there are still gaps, especially around mental health, which is probably one of the largest gaps. We've done research on mental health, on justice systems, and on homelessness, and all of them come back to the need for additional resources around mental health. It's not the traditional—and when I say traditional, I mean mainstream traditional—services. It has to be incorporated. It has to respect our teachings, and I believe that can be done. I truly believe that can be done, and I believe it is a way forward. I guess I have to believe that. I believe there are really good people in this world who want to make a difference, and sometimes we just don't know how to do that.

Mr. Shawn Matthew Glode: I have one last thing I would like to say. I know our time is getting down there. Cody didn't come from a broken home. My wife and I have been married for 22 years. My parents were married for over 40 years. My in-laws have been married for over 30 years. Cody did not come from a home where there was alcohol abuse or drug abuse. He didn't come from a home where there was physical abuse or sexual abuse. It just goes to show that regardless of your upbringing, this poison can get you, and if the help is not there, then unfortunately it can be very tragic.

The Chair: Thank you both for that.

We'll make the most of our time and move right into the questions. The first seven-minute question is from Don Rusnak.

Mr. Don Rusnak (Thunder Bay—Rainy River, Lib.): Thank you for coming and sharing your story with us. I know it must be very difficult to share the story.

I come from the community of Thunder Bay in northwestern Ontario. I'm Ontario's only first nation member of Parliament, and I often see institutional racism across government agencies, in police forces, in city councils, and in municipalities, all across institutions.

I'll give you an example. The friendship centre in Thunder Bay was attempting to have a youth centre built. Unfortunately, because it was a first nation or Indian friendship centre that was proposing the youth centre, there was a lot of vocal opposition. They never said that the reason they were vocal was that the Indian Friendship Centre was the proponent, but many people felt that was the reason there was vocal opposition. Then the city ultimately defeated or didn't approve the centre, so it was a lost opportunity in my community to help out first nation youth and indeed all youth in our community.

It's now a chicken wing spot. It's not that I don't like chicken wings, but I think a better use of that facility could have been as a youth centre.

One of the great things that we've heard about—and I've heard this from my colleagues—is the work that friendship centres do across the country. I'm not that familiar with your friendship centre in Halifax, and although, the chair and I have a friend from the Eskasoni Mi'kmaw Nation named Jaime Batiste, I'm not that familiar with his community or the communities on the east coast.

Could you let us know about anything that your friendship centre does specifically with youth or has been planning to do with youth in a preventive way to help youth avoid these situations, or just to help our youth generally?

● (1655)

Mrs. Pamela Glode Desrochers: Our centre has a youth group. It is a drop-in centre. We also do programming around employment and training with our youth.

We have a mental health project as well. Actually, our funding runs out on the 30th of this month. It's short-term funding. We also usually apply for the urban partnership youth funds. Of course, there are lots of challenges around applying for short-term funding. There are usually gaps. Our friendship centre is large enough that I can carry some of that when those gaps happen, but the reality is that there's still not enough being done. There's still not that dedicated stream that allows us to do what needs to be done.

I know that most friendship centres have a youth component. Each friendship centre is unique and different, but we are fortunate enough to work within the HRM school system as well. We go into the schools and work with students in high school and junior high. That leaves us challenges as well, because we're spread throughout HRM, which is very large.

The Chair: That's the Halifax Regional Municipality.

Mrs. Pamela Glode Desrochers: Yes, I'm sorry.

It's large, and when you're trying to get youth in, there are challenges around that. There is mental health. We do employment. Of course, we do an addictions piece not just for our youth but for our community as a whole. We also do food security with many of our youth.

We do moose hunting too, trying to get our kids back on traditional grounds. Part of the food security that we do involves trying to bring that cultural piece back in.

Mr. Don Rusnak: I've said before at this committee—and it's my view alone, but perhaps some committee members share my view—that we need a two-pronged approach to this crisis in our communities. One would deal with the immediate problem by funding programs like yours and other innovative programs, to make sure the youth have some hope and have the services they need when they need them. The other would build up our communities. That's the long-term solution, so we won't be facing this crisis over and over and over again, and committees years from now will not be studying the same problem.

As I said, I wasn't that familiar with Eskasoni or some of the other communities on the east coast. Can you give us a little bit of information regarding the state of the communities, culturally and economically, and any positives that are happening in the communities?

● (1700)

Mrs. Pamela Glode Desrochers: Are you talking about the first nations community or the community that I provide programs and services for?

Mr. Don Rusnak: I mean both, if you can.

Mrs. Pamela Glode Desrochers: Okay.

There are 13 first nations in Nova Scotia, and some of them have subcommunities. Some of them are quite strong and some of them need some help. Some of them are strong financially; some of them are not. Culturally they are very different. Eskasoni is very rich in its language. Then, if you go to Millbrook, where we're from, it doesn't seem to be as strong. It's not that the community doesn't want it; it's that colonization happened first where we are, and then it spread, so we've had the longest contact, which affects our language and our cultural pieces.

It's always a challenge, even for us in the urban context. We have to pull from our community, the 13 first nations, many times to get that cultural component in the urban context. We do it and we are seeing it more and more as a transition, as the migration from the first nations community into the urban context. You're seeing more and more traditional people come into the urban context.

There are wide ranges. No two communities are the same. I do see our indigenous community in Halifax, HRM, as a community. It's not recognized as a community, but we're very much a community. We provided programs and services to 4,800 clients last year, and I suspect we are actually missing more than that.

The Chair: Thank you both for the question and answer.

The next question is from Cathy McLeod.

Mrs. Cathy McLeod: When you started your testimony, you said you wanted to put a face to this issue. I can tell you, with all certainty, that you've put a very powerful face to this issue. I think there's a heaviness in all of our hearts. This is not only because of what you've gone through but also because of the task that we have ahead, to try to come up with something that we're going to recommend to the government, some steps forward that are at least going to start making a dent in this tragedy.

Mr. Glode, please tell us parliamentarians what would be most important for us to consider having as part of where we ultimately go with this report.

Mr. Shawn Matthew Glode: I believe we need front-line mental health workers in the communities. That's a given—no ifs, ands, or buts about it. We need to have those people there. We need to have them available so that when a crisis like Cody's happens at 1 a.m., we have a mobile crisis team or somebody who can react. We don't have that. We have nothing. We have the health care system in our area 8 to 4, Monday to Friday.

My daughter attempted to take her life five years ago. She's with a therapist. When Cody took his life, she was really bad. We tried to get her in immediately, but she had a two-week wait even though they knew what she was going through.

I work for the federal government. I've worked for the federal government for 17 years. If my supervisor came to me tomorrow and told me we had no money but he needed me to do something, I would do it, because I feel in my heart that it's important or I wouldn't be doing the job I'm doing.

I'm not “dissing” the health care workers—I know your home life is more important than your job. At the same time, if I'd been a therapist, I would have told my daughter I was booked for the next two weeks but she could come see me during my lunch hour. I would have made sure there was a way to help that person immediately. Having front-line health care workers who understand the culture and the people is a must. They have to be able to relate to the people and understand where they're coming from.

● (1705)

Mrs. Cathy McLeod: You talked about having sweats and support culturally for your son who was the last one with Cody. Is that something you were able to use to make contact after Cody passed?

Mr. Shawn Matthew Glode: After Cody passed, a younger member of council came to my house. He brought a smudge bowl and an eagle feather, and he reached out to us and said they were going to have a sweat that night for the family. That was the day of Cody's death.

We had another individual come into the house. I'll be honest: I've been in law enforcement for quite a few years, and I was skeptical when he came to the house with tattoos on his neck and he was a rough-looking character. He came in and sat with my children. The kids from the community were there and he drummed with them. He stayed there for 18 hours a day to drum and pray with the kids. He got nothing; he didn't get paid. He didn't do anything other than put his time into those children.

I really believe that without him we would have had more suicides as a result of Cody's. A lot of kids in the community looked up to Cody. He was a role model, a firefighter, and an MMA fighter. He was a tough guy, and everybody loved him. He was a great kid and a great young man. I guess I'll always call him a kid, but he was a great young man.

This man who came to our house is the type of person you need. You need people who have their heart and soul in this stuff. Unfortunately, he was running a program there and because he has a criminal record, and it has taken a long time for him to get a pardon, he's been asked to step away from that. This man was sent to our family by God. He's done so much for my oldest son. He's done so much for us. I can't say enough.

Mrs. Cathy McLeod: It was him reaching out to you and that sort of culturally—

Mr. Shawn Matthew Glode: That's what started the sweats. It was one of the elders in the community who put on the sweats, and we sweat every day for two weeks. It was the first time in many years that I went into a sweat, but I sweat regularly now. In my opinion, to relieve the stress and to clear your mind, there's no better therapy.

Mrs. Pamela Glode Desrochers: I think it's really important for these front-line workers to be in the community and part of the community. I can't stress that enough. It's so important to have somebody there who takes part in activities and becomes part of the community.

I look at mainstream services, and I know that's probably not the nicest context in which to put them, but that's how I see them. The mainstream services are part of a very cold system. It's not welcoming. As an indigenous person, I don't see myself in that system. With their programs and services, the friendship centres become part of the community, and that's what makes them successful. They are intertwined with the community, and I think that is the biggest piece here, that things have to be done in the community. There's no sense in us telling people they have to go to Halifax or Eskasoni when we know they're not going to stay. It has to be in their own community. They have to see the services in their communities. That's probably the biggest key, because then that cultural piece can be intertwined. It's very key for that to be put in there. It has to be put in there.

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

The next question is from Alistair.

Mr. Alistair MacGregor: Pamela and Matthew, thank you very much, as Cathy said, for coming here today and putting a human face on a very difficult issue. I think sometimes when we're discussing policies and general statistics we forget the human factor, so thank you for coming and sharing that story with me today.

Pamela, I think I'll start with you. As I said to our previous witnesses, part of my riding lies on the traditional territories of the Cowichan people. The Cowichan tribes form the largest first nations band in British Columbia. I've been privileged to have a very deep relationship with them over the past few years.

I've lived there for 27 years, and for much of my life, in my youth growing up, it was like the two solitudes. I went through my entire childhood and teenage years without ever finding out or learning about people I saw every day, my neighbours. We hosted the North American Indigenous Games in 2008, and that acted as a real catalyst for the community. Ever since then we've been trying to build bridges. We've had the Walk of the Nations. There's not an event that goes by that doesn't acknowledge the territory it stands on.

A lot of work still needs to be done, but I see the beginnings of something really positive. We have a friendship centre in the Cowichan Valley, and one of its main goals is to provide the cultural bridge between the aboriginal and non-aboriginal population.

I'm just wondering if you could tell the committee a bit about some of the programs that exist in your area, or something that can be used as a template in that regard.

● (1710)

Mrs. Pamela Glode Desrochers: You're asking me about the types of programs that our friendship centre runs?

Mr. Alistair MacGregor: Yes, or can you tell me something that would bridge the two communities together? Often we have the two populations living in isolation from each other and not getting to learn about each other. I was really struck by your comment that we have to do this together. So could you answer in that context, please?

Mrs. Pamela Glode Desrochers: One of the biggest roles I see a friendship centre playing is bridging that gap.

Part of my mandate as executive director is to ensure that I am out there educating people on what a friendship centre does and what our communities are doing, but that's intertwined in all our programs and services.

Friendship centres have an open-door policy. If anybody comes through my door, I provide programs and services to them. Some of our programs nobody ever wanted to touch. For example, our methadone program and our needle-exchange program were needed by the community, and not just by our indigenous community; there was a huge need in the non-indigenous community. We worked with the non-indigenous community to bring in those programs under the umbrella of the friendship centre.

It's part of our being really good neighbours and part of our having the ability to send our staff to schools and to governments. We get a lot of calls for an elder to do an opening. We know that, and I now have a programs coordinator, and that's part of her job. It's building those pieces into our friendship centre and into our programs.

Often we do it on our own dime, because it's that important to us. Most of our programs don't cover expenses around that. I do stuff on the weekends all the time. I don't get paid for that stuff, but it's important enough to me and my community, as we move forward, to ensure that we're good neighbours; and we are good neighbours. I want people coming in through my door. How many times do I hear people who walk by my door saying we are the building with the paintings on it? If you ever see a picture of our friendship centre, that's what you will see; I can guarantee you. But it's more than that. It's about building long-term relationships and partnerships that you want to be long term so there are long-term benefits for everybody.

We can't do everything, so it's about how we position ourselves to bring in programs we may not have the expertise for, but we bring them in under the umbrella of the friendship centre. We provide free rent to several organizations; that's how important I believe those organizations are for our community. It's about bringing people into our community while we're still going out.

We provide cultural training. Our elder Debbie did cultural training for, I'm going to say, 500 HR and police officers. We didn't charge for any of that. It's about building relationships.

Now a lot of the Halifax police will come by for tea or coffee. We never had that before. It starts to break down those barriers, and that is so important to do. It allows us to make a really quick call if.... I have a perfect example. I got a call last week. A young man I've known for a long time, who has been part of our centre for as long as I can remember, was picked up by the police. They asked what to do in this situation. They came to us first before they hauled him off to put him in a cell. We were able to bridge that, and they were comfortable enough to come to us. That is really key, because the issue was more of a cultural issue than a criminal issue. We were able to walk through that, and that's a big difference. I probably would never have seen that before.

● (1715)

Mr. Alistair MacGregor: In the process of building those bridges between the aboriginal and non-aboriginal community, have you seen any results or gotten any feedback from the aboriginal youth you have helped? Do they see the trust that's being built between those communities as helping overall? Can that be used as one of many building blocks to getting to where we eventually want to be?

Mrs. Pamela Glode Desrochers: Yes. We did a project—

Are we out of time?

The Chair: I'm so sorry. Maybe we can slide it into the answer to another question.

Mrs. Pamela Glode Desrochers: I can answer that on the side.

The Chair: The next question is from Michael McLeod.

Mr. Michael McLeod: I wanted to say thank you for sharing your story. It's very tough for us to listen to something so tragic that happened to you directly, and I think all of us, especially as aboriginal people, can relate to having lost someone, family or friend.

We visited a number of communities and the issue is widespread, and just when I started thinking we had the pieces of the puzzle lined up, your story made it all crash to the sidelines, because there are so many different things that you could point to, and sometimes you can't point to any of them. I heard for most of my life that we have issues as a result of residential schools. We had a residential school in my community, and it destroyed a lot of people. As I've travelled around this last go-round, I'm hearing that one of the most important things is to be able to restore pride in our people so they can be proud of who they are, and especially the youth. That's going to be a very difficult challenge.

I watched my daughter struggle with the loss of her friend, and we encouraged her to speak about it and she spoke in classes, and other schools heard about it so they got her to travel. As a result, her phone was ringing day and night because of people in situations who had no place to turn, so they were turning to a young girl who was only about 16 years old. I finally had to ask her not to do it anymore, because she was awake day and night and she was getting depressed over the issue. But that points to the lack of resources. I'm really not one to want to reinvent the wheel, and I'm also one who really supports friendship centres. I founded the one in my community. I wrote the constitution and bylaws. I worked for years until we got the money. I helped other communities develop them only to watch them get cut, slashed to a point where they could barely function. Most things are done by whoever has the time, whoever wants to donate their time, and whatever handouts they can get for the food kitchen or whatever.

But there's an opportunity there to make it something that communities could use, and the program hasn't expanded in the last few years. We have the Aboriginal Head Start, which really caters to the younger population, the young mothers, the families that have young children and that are challenged. A lot of the families, we know, are impacted by FAE or alcohol or learning disabilities and things of that nature, and they work with them. They help them. They teach them, including through the sports circles. There are so many things that are out there, but some of them are almost invisible. Aboriginal Head Start is plopped so far down in Public Health, you don't even know it exists. I don't even think the deputy knows where it's at, because they never raise it; they never talk about it. I ask about it. There's no real plan for it.

So there are so many things that exist that we could use. In our last northern tour, I heard it put best that we have to have facilities that can act as crisis centres, family centres, cultural centres. I think friendship centres could maybe fill that void. Maybe we could talk about that, and maybe talk about the resources that are needed.

● (1720)

Mrs. Pamela Glode Desrochers: I can tell you right now that there are 119 friendship centres, and I truly believe that every urban setting should have a friendship centre. I truly believe that. I would not be where I am today without my friendship centre. As far as resources that are needed go, I'll give you a perfect example. The small number of dollars I get, I do leverage. However, when I leverage those dollars, I'm spending a lot of time writing 38 or 40 other reports and constantly writing proposals, which is the story of my life. Having the resources so I wouldn't have to worry about the day-to-day core operations would be huge.

We have very little money. The funding needs to be long-term funding. There can't be a short-term funding solution. It needs to be a longer-term funding solution, whether that's for youth programming.... I actually believe youth funding should be part of our core funding. There should be no gaps in youth funding. There just shouldn't be any gaps. Youth funding should be core funded through and through and through again. They are our future.

Mr. Michael McLeod: Thank you for that.

I honestly believe that every aboriginal community should have a friendship centre, and they should be resourced to deal with the many issues they need to tackle. We can't ignore that the issue of FAE is widespread in our communities. The jails are full of people who really need help and assistance. As for suicide, friendship centres can deliver education programs, cultural programs, sports programs, and so many other things.

I watched our friendship centre be the only facility open in the whole community during the Christmas holidays, on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day. It stayed open all night trying to help people who needed rides, people who were homeless, people who were hungry. Every other government facility shut down. In fact, every other government facility is run by non-community members, so they all leave. They go home for the holidays.

I really believe what you said about having a solution by our own people. Our social ills have to be cured by our own people, but we need the resources to deal with them.

The Chair: That's time.

Mr. Michael McLeod: I didn't ask a question.

The Chair: I know you didn't.

Mr. Michael McLeod: That's okay. I got to make a statement.

Mrs. Pamela Glode Desrochers: I have lots to say about that, too.

The Chair: I'm going to address the things that you didn't have time to say at the end.

We have time for one more five-minute question, and this one is from Arnold Viersen.

Mr. Arnold Viersen: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you for being here. It's a profound story that you've given, and it definitely gives me some heartache.

I want to congratulate the friendship centres on the success they have. I think a big part of that success is that almost every one of them has somebody like you who champions them. We've heard over and over again that it's community engagement and communities that bring forward the ideas. Those are the successful programs. We've also heard that, considering the amount of work that's done through friendship centres, they punch way above their weight because of individuals who are personally invested in them.

If we were to try to facilitate having a friendship centre in every community or in every urban centre, how would we go about ensuring that there would be a group of people or an individual like you to be the backstop on that?

Just as with every other program, typically the intent is amazing, but if we don't have the right people to backstop it, it never happens, or the money gets spent and nothing happens.

If we're going to go down this avenue of having friendship centres as a solution, how will we find the right people to backstop them?

● (1725)

Mrs. Pamela Glode Desrochers: First and foremost, it has to be for community by community. It has to be wanted and needed in that community. There is probably not one community I've been to that hasn't said, “I wish we had a friendship centre. I wish we had something like what you have.” The model is there. It's a great model. It works. There are ways to incorporate that. Of course, getting good people is always a challenge. Looking around, I would say that the people sitting on the other side of the table are the ones we often poach our staff members from. It is always a challenge, but it's very fulfilling to see that friendship centres have that ability to build the capacity in communities. You may have to start with satellite offices that are hosted by main friendship centres, but there are ways to do those things.

I think you have a really good model. It's working with the communities and making sure that it addresses their needs.

Mr. Arnold Viersen: One great thing about friendship centres is their ability to attract everybody. I think it's right there in the name: friendship centre.

One thing I always watch when the government gets involved is that there's a whole list of criteria you have to meet in order to be employed by a company the government is funding. Could you give us a little bit of a profile of some of the people who work with you? Do they have university degrees and these kinds of things? I think you get what I'm trying to get at here.

Mrs. Pamela Glode Desrochers: Yes, they do. I've been with our friendship centre for 24 years and prior to that I went through many of the programs and services. It's amazing to see the difference in the people who come through our door now for employment. Even summer students, which is a huge piece for us, are coming in with degrees now, and they want to work in their communities.

We have 85 employees at our friendship centre, so we're a pretty good size. Most of them are coming in with degrees now. However, I always look for somebody who we can build that capacity with. It's really key that we remember that we are there to move our communities forward and to take those members who may not have that degree but who we can build that capacity with. It's always about building capacity, and it's always about community. It has to always be about community, not individuals. Building capacity benefits us in the long term.

Summer students are sometimes one of my biggest challenges; I won't lie. Sometimes they are the biggest challenges, but it's most rewarding when you see them move through the system. Then they're hired by us, and then they move on to these great jobs.

The Chair: Thanks for the question and the answer.

That brings us to the end, and it's a good spot to end at.

Thank you both so much for your time and for travelling today. Your input into our study is very important.

I'll let you know that we expect the study to be concluded and a report finalized some time in the new year, maybe February or early March. That will become a public document at some point, once it's tabled and accepted.

In the first half of the meeting, you heard me mention the online portal. I'm going to make sure we get that address to you, and I would ask you to share that as broadly as you're able to in order to get folks to share whatever story they can.

Mrs. Pamela Glode Desrochers: We'll certainly do that.

The Chair: Thank you so much again for your time. We'll see you in Halifax.

The meeting is adjourned.