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Chair

The Honourable MaryAnn Mihychuk

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● (1545)

[*English*]

The Chair (Hon. MaryAnn Mihychuk (Kildonan—St. Paul, Lib.)): I call the meeting to order. I'm sorry for the delay. We were in the House exercising democracy by voting.

That aside, I wanted to recognize that we're on the unceded territory of the Algonquin people and we are in a process of truth and reconciliation. We start our meetings with the recognition by verbalizing it and we recognize that this committee, in particular, has an important role to play in how the truth and reconciliation process proceeds.

We're close to the end of a fire study, and I'm very pleased that you could come out and present to us in person. For those of you here by video conference, you're looking very good. We can see you and I hope that the audio is going to be as good. Thank you so much for participating.

The way it works is that presenters will have 10 minutes. We'll do all of the presenters and then we will go to a question-and-answer period. I'm going to remind MPs to be specific on who you direct your question to, so that we can be efficient and so we know how this is going to roll out.

If anybody has a brief or has one at home, or any notes at all, we'd appreciate it if you sent it into the committee under “briefs”. You can do that online and just send it in.

Let's get started. We have Six Nations of the Grand River. Then we have Laurence Pearce. Then we have Allan Peters.

Chief Ava Hill and Matt Miller from Six Nations of the Grand River, welcome. It's nice to see you again.

Chief Ava Hill (Chief, Six Nations of the Grand River): Thank you. I'm glad to be here.

Thank you for inviting me on very short notice to take part in this. If I'd had more notice, I would be there with you in person. Nevertheless, I am pleased to be here to make a presentation on fire and emergency service, something which I'm very passionate about as the chief of the largest first nation population in this country.

I want to introduce Matt Miller, who is with you there. Matt is the Six Nations fire chief and is also the president of the Ontario Native Firefighters Society and the Ontario director of the Aboriginal Firefighters Association of Canada. At the end of my presentation, I'd like him to reaffirm some of the statements or make a few comments. Also, since he's there with you, he can assist with any questions you have.

I want to start with some statistics according to an Indigenous Affairs first nations fire protection study for 2010 to 2015, which states that fire losses—that is, deaths, injuries, and destruction of property—in first nation communities, particularly those on remote first nations lands, far exceed those in off-reserve communities. The first nations per capita fire incidence rate is 2.4 times the per capita rate for the rest of Canada. The death rate is 10.4 times greater, the fire injury rate is 2.5 times greater, and the fire damage per unit is 2.1 times greater.

The federal government doesn't know the current exact death toll of first nations fires across Canada because it stopped keeping track of on-reserve fire fatality statistics in 2010. People living on a first nation in Canada are 10.4 times more likely to die in a house fire than in any other community in Canada.

Due to the size and population of the Six Nations community, the statistics are easily seen, as they are amplified because of our size. The Six Nations Fire and Emergency Services Department currently responds to approximately 24 to 30 structure fires per year in the Six Nations community. Without adequate fire protection funding, we will lose more of our people to fire, as we did this past December when we tragically lost a young child who perished in a house fire.

I am now in my 14th year as a member of the Six Nations elected council. I spent nine years as a councillor, and this is my fourth year as the chief, and I have been advocating for sufficient funding for fire and emergency services during all that time. I will continue to advocate for it.

We have also stressed many times that fire and emergency service on first nations communities should be classified as an essential service, which it is. We have always found that there was reluctance on the part of the Government of Canada to classify it as an essential service, as it would change the funding that should be made available.

First nations communities are different from municipalities, which rely on a tax base to fund their fire services. As the first peoples here, we have tax immunity, and we do not levy a tax on our people. Also, section 87 of the Indian Act clearly states that we are “exempt from taxation”.

We are very proud of the Six Nations Fire and Emergency Services, which over the past years has become recognized as one of the outstanding first nations fire services in the country. This is due to the leadership of our fire chief, Matt Miller, who is attending this event today.

Our service focuses on providing the best possible service to our community and continues to work tirelessly in the areas of prevention, education, and firefighter training and development. Not only is our service is concerned with the fire protection that is provided to Six Nations, but it is working to ensure that other first nations, particularly in the remote communities, get the service they need. It was contracted a couple of years ago to work with the northern communities to ensure that fire alarms were installed in homes in some of those communities.

Also, as a revenue generator, our council has worked with the fire service to establish a training academy, which is providing firefighter training to first nations people across the province. I was pleased to attend their first graduating class last spring, and I'm happy to advise that they just finished training in Thunder Bay last week. Although this training sometimes takes our firefighters out of the community, they are quite active in community activities, particularly in the area of fire prevention and education.

Also, in 2014, INAC Ontario region initiated the “be fire safe” smoke and carbon monoxide detector program. The program delivered smoke and carbon monoxide detectors to 41 first nations communities at high risk for fires. In 2016-2017 INAC, through a partnership with the Ontario Native Fire Fighters Society and Six Nations Fire and Emergency Services, initiated a training/mentoring program for those high-risk first nations, which received these detectors for all of their communities.

● (1550)

It was identified during the community visit portion of the 2016-2017 Be Fire Safe program that none of the communities had a properly trained fire prevention officer or fire chief to ensure that fire prevention programs were being delivered regularly and consistently. Inadequate funding support was also identified as a significant issue that did not allow for training or program delivery on a consistent basis.

Recently INAC, through this same partnership with the Ontario Native Fire Fighters Society and Six Nations, initiated the Be Fire Safe program in the southern district first nations. The goal of the training program was to install two combination smoke/carbon monoxide detectors into homes in each of the southern first nations and other non-remote first nations communities. It is recommended that this program continue and be done annually to ensure that detectors have been installed in every Ontario region first nation home and that fire prevention programs are being delivered adequately and regularly in first nations communities.

In addition to these programs, we need to secure funding to enhance existing services, equipment, and infrastructure.

I also want to talk briefly about the emergency services part of Six Nations Fire and Emergency Services. A couple of years ago we had a hazardous waste fire at our landfill here at Six Nations, and it was so bad that we declared it an emergency. We had to bring in a hazmat team to help clean up, and we incurred a huge cost to do so. We had to expend dollars that we really did not have. It was unexpected and not budgeted for. When the emergency was over, we went both to the province and to the federal government for assistance to cover those costs. The province turned us down with a flat no and said that we were a federal responsibility. The federal government initially told us no, but after much persistence—and those of you who know me know that I am very persistent—we did get them to cover half the cost. That means we are still carrying half of that deficit, and they refuse to this day to cover that. That was two or three years ago.

We are not only concerned with the necessary funding for the equipment, services, training, and infrastructure; we are also concerned for the well-being of our firefighters. In a community such as ours, where everyone knows everyone else, it can be very traumatic for our firefighters to come upon a scene where they, more often than not, may find a family member involved in the incident. We need to do more to assist our firefighters to deal with the post-traumatic stresses they face. If our firefighters are not healthy, they will put our community in more danger.

A few years ago, on a Sunday morning, just after our fire chief began his position, some counsellors and I had a session with them. They were down in the dumps because of insufficient funding. They didn't have the training or the equipment, and because of this they were also suffering from low morale. We knew that we needed to do something, not only to get them more funding but to lift their spirits. We began doing our own fundraising. We started our firefighters' gala, and I am pleased to say that we had our third gala this fall. Through that we have been able to raise money for equipment and training.

These galas have not only been able to raise some funds for our service; they have also lifted the spirits of our firefighters, as presentations of several awards are also highlights of the galas. In addition, the council and the community show our first responders, including our fire and emergency services, our paramedics, and our police service, our gratefulness by providing a first responders' breakfast for them every May 1.

As I said, we have had to resort to fundraising and using our own resources, and it's still not enough. The federal government has the fiduciary responsibility to provide this service, and we think it is time that they stepped up to the plate and provided the funding that we need. Six Nations is the largest populated first nation in the country, and we have joined forces with other large first nations in Ontario. We have found that the federal government operates on a variety of formulas, some of which are related to the provision of funding for fire services. We have been discriminated against by these formulas because of our size, as we have found that many of them cap the population component at 2,000 people. We hope to meet with the Minister of Indigenous Services in the very near future to discuss this, and we would welcome your support in this regard.

Until such time as the first nations fire protection funding formula is updated to adequate comparable off-reserve levels and transitioned to a targeted funding designation, people living in first nations communities in this country will continue to die in extraordinarily high numbers as a result of fires.

I also want to tell you that one area where this government could assist Six Nations with funding is to settle our outstanding land rights struggles. We originally settled on 950,000 acres in the Haldimand tract, but because of actions of the Indian agents of the day, most of our land was sold or stolen or given away, and we were never compensated for it.

● (1555)

We have been in discussions with the government for many years on finding a solution. We have a global solution. If the government were to provide the funding to compensate for the lands that were stolen from us, it would be in the trillions. Since we know that would bankrupt the government, we are proposing a global solution whereby direct transfer payments would be made to Six Nations by the Government of Canada on an annual basis, with an escalator built in every year. If we were able to agree on that, Six Nations of the Grand River would be able to look after all of our needs without being forced to jump through the financial hoops that are always forced on us by the Government of Canada.

We know best what is needed in our community. We know what our priorities are and we know what is needed to make our communities safe. We do not want to lose any more first nations children to fires and we are calling upon the government to ensure that we don't. It is time for the government to let the rest of the country know that first nations lives matter.

Lastly, I want to refer to the Ontario Native Fire Fighters Society, the fine work they are doing, and the strategic plan that they have developed.

On May 3 of 2017, Chiefs of Ontario passed a resolution supporting the Ontario Native Fire Fighters Society and their strategic plan. Although this strategic plan is regionally based to address first nations fire protection issues in Ontario, it is closely aligned with the strategic priorities of the Aboriginal Firefighters Association of Canada, which is currently working closely with INAC on the creation of an indigenous fire marshal's office.

All of the information in the strategic plan has been provided to Indigenous Affairs on a regular basis for the past 24 months. In that time we have lost 18 first nations people in the province of Ontario, including the child that we lost in our community just before Christmas. This strategic plan will be a living document that serves as both a road map and a guide for identifying Ontario region first nation fire protection issues and will assist in prioritizing actions so that we can assist in further developing fire prevention, fire protection, and emergency services into the future that are comparable to off-reserve levels of service.

The three-year plan represents a commitment to the continued creation of a working partnership with every first nation in the province of Ontario, Ontario's Office of the Fire Marshal, and Indigenous and Northern Affairs.

Furthermore, our continued commitment to partnership is to engage further with both the provincial and federal governments with a shared focus on decreasing the unacceptably high number of first nations fire-related fatalities in first nation communities. This plan is all-encompassing, progressive, and achievable, and I fully support the work that they're doing.

If I have a couple of minutes, I'll turn it over to the Six Nations fire chief, Matt Miller, if he has anything to add.

● (1600)

The Chair: We're over time, so maybe we can get your comments during the question period.

We're going to move on to the next presenter. We have Laurence Pearce, researcher.

You are coming to us from North Vancouver.

Dr. Laurence Pearce (Researcher, As an Individual): Good afternoon. “Laurie” is fine.

I'm actually speaking to you from Vancouver, and I would like to recognize that I'm speaking to you from the unceded traditional territories of the Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh first nations. I thank them for allowing me to speak to you from their territory.

I'd like to present to you today information about two projects I've been involved with in relation to disaster and emergency management and Canadian indigenous people. I'd like to address the challenges as well as the opportunities.

The first project, which was funded by INAC, has to do with research that I undertook along with my colleagues Dr. Brenda Murphy and Dr. Annette Chrétien from Wilfrid Laurier University. It involved working with the oversight of an indigenous committee and an indigenous member of the research team to explore, through talking circles and interviews, the experiences of first nations communities from British Columbia to Nova Scotia who were evacuated as a result of a disaster and/or who served as a host community to those who were evacuated.

Our findings were disturbing but not unexpected, as they were supported by an extensive literature review. Indigenous families and communities faced continued suffering during evacuation and post evacuation. Displacements resulted in social isolation, lack of access to traditional food, repeated moves, job insecurity, lack of or inconsistent access to education, and poor psychological health outcomes.

There are three critical areas that I would like to address.

First, indigenous people have strong ties to the land, and having to leave that land to be placed in an alternate location for what may be weeks or months, especially if it's in a large urban centre, can result in additional and unnecessary trauma.

Second, by definition, disasters require the involvement of outsiders to assist a community that cannot manage the impacts of a disaster alone. This can result in outsiders arriving with little or no knowledge of the existing community, its culture, and the importance of that culture in regard to traditional foods, ceremonies, and healing practices.

The third issue is by no means an issue that only affects first nation communities, but it is one that, given the challenges faced by many first nations communities, may have a disproportionate effect on them. It is the issue of capacity. Many first nations people are responsible for two, three, or four different roles in their community, often without adequate disaster and emergency management training and resources.

What does that translate to? The first nations people who spoke to us through the talking circles and interviews told us it means that when outsiders come in and tell you to line up, take a number, and leave your home, it can trigger the trauma and memories of residential schools and the sixties scoop and add to the trauma of potentially losing or actually losing their home and possessions.

It means, for some, a sense of loss of control when there is not a sense of having a lot of control to start with. It means having to comply with the policies, rules, and regulations of other organizations. It can mean having security personnel watch your every step 24-7 while you are in a hotel, and being told who can and cannot come to visit with you. It can mean being told that your pets can't be accommodated with you and will have to be left behind. For some, we were told, the experience of the evacuation and displacement was worse than residential school. It means that when people are used to hunting and fishing and living off the land, when evacuated because of approaching wildfires, they're given vouchers to eat in greasy diners or fed pasta day after day with no fresh vegetables or fruit, and they get sick.

Culture provides protection and security, a buffer from trauma, and when evacuated populations are not welcomed into host communities and there are no opportunities to practice smudging, burning of sweetgrass, or forming healing circles, their culture is not there to support them in times of hardship. It can mean living in a hotel room, day after day, week after week, month after month, often with a number of children, and with little or no access to activities for those children or parents, in a strange community, with little connection to one's family or clan and little ability to engage in the repair and rebuilding of one's home. It means being moved multiple times from hotel to hotel and receiving no emotional, psychological, or psychosocial support for those families.

For a youth, having lost their mobile phone in the disaster and now losing their connection to friends, being in a big city for the first time may mean being lured to the street and the inherent dangers of drugs, alcohol, and gangs.

● (1605)

It means being responsible for the general maintenance on your reserve, such as fixing fences and arranging for garbage pickup, and the next day suddenly being put in charge of the rebuilding and repair of the homes of hundreds of people, with no disaster or emergency management training for recovery. It means having a fire truck, but not having enough people trained on reserve to serve as firefighters or not having the funds or skills to maintain the fire truck.

It also means that everyone is too busy to look for existing strengths and capacities, such as engaging with elders to have the knowledge and wisdom to support others. It means that enduring the trauma of evacuation, whether from fire, flood, tornado, or other disaster, is just that much worse.

Despite these challenges, there are opportunities for positive changes. One of the outcomes of our research project is a guide, "From Displacement to Hope: A Guide for Displaced Indigenous Communities and Host Communities", which provides numerous recommendations and strategies to minimize the trauma of evacuation and displacement. The bilingual guide will be distributed across Canada by the end of the fiscal year to all first nation communities and can serve as the first step to working with provincial and territorial governments, along with local government and non-governmental organizations, to work towards better solutions.

As well, one of the next steps already under way is the enhancement of the videos located on the Canadian Risk and Hazards Network site and the development of additional videos, which can be downloaded and used in training and awareness sessions to underscore the issues facing first nations people who are facing evacuation.

In addition, my colleagues and I will be developing a training curriculum to bring together in a workshop setting all of the key stakeholders to work on developing collaborative strategies for individual first nation communities before, during, and after fires and other disasters.

Disasters don't recognize political boundaries, and because they quickly overwhelm local resources, it's important to reach out to other communities prior to a disaster to identify opportunities for mutual aid. Communities can become sister communities, share training funding and opportunities, share resources, be of support, and serve as host communities should evacuation be necessary.

A guide, “Mutual Aid and Service Agreements: Wise Practices for First Nations Communities”, is designed to support first nation communities in meeting with other non-indigenous or other first nation communities to develop mutual aid agreements to support fire and emergency management efforts, along with those for other disasters. Mutual aid is widely used in urban centres for fire response and now needs to be extended to first nations communities. While the potential is there, outstanding issues related to diminished first nation capacities and strained settler-first nation relationships must first be addressed. No longer can fire crews stand by, not responding until the fire leaves the reserve boundaries.

Another project that I and my colleagues from Wilfrid Laurier University have been involved in is the aboriginal disaster resiliency planning tool, ADRP, which is a web-based tool developed collaboratively with staff from and hosted by the Justice Institute of British Columbia. The ADRP provides communities with a comprehensive capacity and strength-based process to identify potential hazards that could lead to disaster and tools to identify those hazards that are of potentially high or low risk, as well as identify where there is little disaster resiliency in place and where existing community strengths exist.

The ADRP further provides tools for communities to assess their overall state of resiliency and the state of their disaster and emergency management plans, resources, and processes. Communities are provided with extensive resources to help them complete the process, such as the steps to build a community profile and carry out a skills and knowledge inventory, as well as a series of videos to support the process and identify how traditional knowledge can be integrated into disaster and emergency management planning to increase buy-in and validity.

Although it's not completely finished and there are a few processes still to be added to the ADRP, nevertheless, since 2016, as a JIBC faculty member, I have used the ADRP tool to teach 266 students who have taken the JIBC hazard, risk, and vulnerability analysis training, supported by Emergency Management BC. That was mostly in B.C., but also in Quebec. It's important to note that these students are from both mainstream and indigenous communities, hopefully encouraging both communities to work collaboratively.

In addition, supported by Indigenous Services Canada, JIBC staff have been supporting the piloting of the ADRP process with two first nations communities, Eskasoni in Nova Scotia and Tzeachten in B. C.

● (1610)

As well, since 2015 members from 71 different indigenous communities have received a one-day train-the-trainer workshop to assist them in carrying out the ADRP.

The Chair: Thank you. We've run out of time, but I do encourage you to submit your brief. It would be very helpful. Thank you very much.

We have one more presenter for 10 minutes, and then I'll ask the committee to think about the questioning period and whether we'll maybe have only one round for this panel. We won't be able to have a complete session because time is so tight.

Mr. Peters, welcome. It's your turn to present.

Mr. Allan Peters (Fire Chief and President, Atlantic Aboriginal Firefighters Association): Good afternoon, Madam Chairperson and other distinguished members of the Standing Committee on Indigenous and Northern Affairs. I thank you for the opportunity to speak on the issue of fire safety and emergency management in indigenous communities.

I would like to recognize that we are unceded Algonquin territory.

My name is Allan Peters. I'm from Elsipogtog, New Brunswick. I'm the current president for the Atlantic Aboriginal Firefighters Association, representing first nations in the Atlantic region. I've been a fire chief for Elsipogtog First Nation for the past 18 years, and I'm also a board member for the Aboriginal Firefighters Association of Canada.

Eighteen years ago, when I started in the fire service, there was nothing. It was from the ground up. When I made my work plan, the very first thing I knew was needed was Fire Fighter 1, for the volunteers, Fire Fighter 2, and whatever extra training I could get.

The other thing I knew was I had to be involved in the New Brunswick Association of Fire Chiefs. At least that way I'd probably have an idea of which direction we were going besides just getting stuck in the reserve and having limited resources, so I became a member of the NBAFC.

The Atlantic Aboriginal Firefighters Association had been inactive for quite a few years, so I managed to kick-start it. We started having meetings in the Atlantic region and we started having regional competitions, and then the winners from the regional competitions usually attended the nationals. We have done a lot in the Atlantic region with the fire service.

I have just one last thing. We are members with the Canadian Association of Fire Chiefs, and we have one seat. They do recognize aboriginals in CAFC.

The issue of fire and emergency management protection is of great concern to our firefighter members. As you are undoubtedly aware, tragically, the first nations communities in Canada have higher per capita death and injury rates within the total population of Canada from fire. According to a 2007 report from the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, for the more than 328,000 first nations people who live on reserve in Canada, the chances of dying in a house fire are 10.4 times higher than in the rest of the country.

The government stopped collecting data on first nation fires in 2010 and has not had any national database since then. A national investigation conducted by the *Toronto Star* in 2017 found that since 2010, there have been 173 fire deaths on first nation reserves, 25 of them children. This is unacceptable. A national strategy is needed to deal with this tragic loss of life, and it begins with a return of data collection in addition to adherence to the National Building Code and the National Fire Code in first nation communities, similar to the remainder of Canada.

Further, the fire services themselves need to become part of a mandatory service within first nations. In many cases, fire services in first nations are woefully underfunded in comparison to their counterparts in the remainder of Canada. Inadequate fire stations, equipment, training, and investigations are all a symptom of recurring tragedies.

● (1615)

In the past year, the Atlantic Aboriginal Firefighters Association partnered with INAC and consulting firm Fire Rescue Atlantic to prepare a risk registry outlining where the highest risks for fire protection were occurring in each of the 12 first nations communities in Atlantic Canada that provide their own fire protection services.

Some of the high-risk situations identified in that analysis of first nations communities include lack of proper national building code and fire code construction; lack of proper firefighting equipment and lack of appropriate maintenance to existing equipment; lack of proper training for firefighters, ranging from everything from firefighting to rescue and emergency medical care for such situations as the opioid crisis, which is putting our firefighters at risk; lack of personal protective equipment, such a breathing apparatus, turnout gear, etc.; lack of strategic documents covering mutual aid agreements, standard operating guidelines, and bylaws governing fire protection and appropriate budgets directed specifically to fire protection; and lack of modern technologies for emergency dispatch.

In one case, a fire department emergency number in a first nations community goes to an answering machine connected to a pager. It was hoped that the firefighter would hear the page and check the answering machine. In 2015 this community had a fire at the local school that saw no fire department response.

This is 2018. An answering machine, when your house is on fire, is not acceptable.

The fire station in my community has a leaky roof and pigeons living in the attic. We are challenged in recruiting volunteer firefighters to staff our fire departments. We recognize this is a challenge, the same as for all other volunteer fire departments in Canada, but we cannot respond to fires and emergencies unless we have adequate firefighters to staff our fire trucks.

Although we have made some progress with our partnership in identifying, and in some cases funding, solutions to some of these issues, we are putting Band-Aids on in some cases rather than looking at a long-term solution. A national approach to fire safety codes for construction and statistic gathering is a national starting point, followed by continued funding designated for fire protection to improve firefighting infrastructure and training to reduce this appalling rate of death, injury, and property damage in our communities.

The Aboriginal Firefighters Association of Canada has worked extensively to identify a framework that will have meaningful impact on fire safety. The core elements include a focus on fire prevention; improved standards, including addressing building and fire code gaps; fire service operation standards; and national coordination of first nation fire services to address region-to-region disparities. The creation of an indigenous fire marshal's office supports all four key strategic priorities. Through continued education by AFAC and collaboration with national partners, in the spring of 2017 Minister Bennett announced support for the creation of an indigenous fire marshal's office. National partners include the Assembly of First Nations, Indigenous Services, Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada, Canadian Association of Fire Chiefs, Canadian Council of Fire Marshals and Fire Commissioners, National Fire Prevention Association, and regional first nations fire and emergency services organizations.

● (1620)

The Chair: We're running out of time.

Mr. Allan Peters: Development of the indigenous fire marshal office, the IFMO, includes both consultation and engagement with first nations leadership and the core design and development of the IFMO. Collaboration with the Assembly of First Nations is under way. This will support the Aboriginal Firefighters Association of Canada, AFAC, to complete the consultation and engagement process, starting with support from the AFN chiefs for the mandate to launch the project. AFAC started the development and research in the fall of 2017, subject to engagement and consultation scheduled by IFMO. We'll launch programs and services on April 1, 2019.

The mission of an indigenous fire marshal office is to support first nations communities and first nations fire departments to enhance fire protection, build community-based capacity, increase resiliency of community infrastructure, and eliminate loss of life due to fires. Additional duties include developing and implementing relevant programs and services enhanced but not fulfilled by the provinces or other federal organizations.

The Chair: Do you think you could submit your brief to us? Oh, is there just that much? Okay.

Mr. Allan Peters: To continue, additional duties also include developing and maintaining standards for the delivery of effective fire protection programs that are free from political interference and not subject to regional disparity. The indigenous fire marshal office will be implemented with ongoing funding and in collaboration with regional first nations emergency service organizations and existing community capacity.

Thank you, Madam Chairperson, for the opportunity to appear before your committee today.

The Chair: We're pleased to have such a charming fire chief, who kind of went over his time.

We're going to do the question periods. Do I have consensus that we'll do maybe seven minutes for each party? Is that okay? I see nodding.

We'll start with MP Amos.

Mr. William Amos (Pontiac, Lib.): Thank you to all of the witnesses. I can appreciate what a challenge it is, with the restricted timelines that we have. Please understand that everyone goes through this challenge and that you're not alone. We find it frustrating ourselves.

I wanted to go directly to one particular aspect and I wanted to ask Chief Hill to comment. I invite Mr. Miller and Mr. Peters as well. Those are the three witnesses I'm seeking comment from.

The fact that the federal government stopped collecting statistics on fires on reserve as of 2010 is shocking. I'm offended to have learned of this. I'm surprised I didn't know this before, but it doesn't change how it makes me feel. I think most Canadians would be quite indignant hearing that.

My question goes specifically to how that data should be collected. How was it collected in the past and how should it be collected in the future? I don't presume that there couldn't be improvements. Who should assume responsibility?

● (1625)

Chief Ava Hill: In the interest of time, I'll let our fire chief answer.

The Chair: All right, Matt.

Mr. Matt Miller (Fire Chief, Six Nations Fire and Emergency Services, Six Nations of the Grand River): The question you ask is a very troubling one. The statistical analysis that is required to provide any sort of strength, any business case that could go forward for any sort of infrastructure improvements or fire service improvements in first nations does not exist right now.

The work that is being done to create the indigenous fire marshal office through the efforts of the Aboriginal Firefighters Association of Canada and Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada is going to bring that ability to create a national database collection, a national incident reporting system. Those are all pieces of the puzzle that are part and parcel, and very important.

The only statistic I can provide you right now is that the provinces and the fire marshals' offices do keep track of first nations fatalities. Thankfully, the Ontario fire marshal's office released that data this past January. In the past 24 months, as my chief had mentioned, we've lost 18 first nations people in Ontario. We've lost 56 first nations people in Ontario in the last 10 years.

Two years ago, I was here in Ottawa on a very similar panel and having a very similar discussion. I told them at that time, “We need to start moving forward, start collecting data. We need to start seeing what the problem is so that we can analyze it and prioritize.” I said, “We're going to lose more of our people, but we need to start doing this.” Here we are, 18 first nations fire deaths later, and we're really not very much further ahead than we were two years ago.

There is a good work that's happening, but it's happening at a pace that is going to result in a lot more first nations fire deaths.

Mr. William Amos: Mr. Peters, do you have any comments on how data should be collected? I also would be interested in your understanding of the reasoning behind the elimination of this data collection.

Mr. Allan Peters: I'm not sure how it was collected before, but at the New Brunswick Office of the Fire Marshal was collecting.... I was reporting to the OFM with my incidents. It's still recorded. That would only be my area. Nobody else in the in the program was linked to the fire marshal's office. I don't know; maybe they didn't feel comfortable with the reporting system or whatnot. I think maybe what is needed is something they can feel way more safe or comfortable with.

Mr. Matt Miller: To answer a bit more specifically to that last question you had on the lack of a legislative framework in first nations' fire protection, we don't have to report anything, so many first nations don't. The indigenous fire marshal's office that we're trying to create right now is an attempt to create that framework so there is a reporting structure in place.

The federal government is the entity that is responsible, and should be responsible, for that data collection, but there's no legislative framework right now. It doesn't make it right, but it's wrong.

Mr. William Amos: Thank you.

My last question is for Chief Hill. My condolences on the house fire your community faced last year. I can only imagine how impactful that is in a small community. My understanding is that your collaboration has been good with the Ontario fire marshal around establishing the causes.

What does that incident tell you about how important an indigenous fire marshal's office might be? I will maybe direct that towards Mr. Miller, since he hasn't had an opportunity to address that point.

● (1630)

Mr. Matt Miller: First off, I'm the gentleman who carried the child out of the house. The impact that fire death had on our community, I can't even put into words. We train every day, just as you would in your municipal urban sector. We're a very lucky first nations fire service to have the support we have from our council. To have to endure that and fight our way into that house the way we did.... I and one of the captains almost didn't make it out with the child, but we did, and we were able to bring some closure for that family.

The relationship we have with the Ontario fire marshal's office is very tight-knit. I'm very close friends with the Ontario fire marshal himself, and it's a very important connection to have, because we need to have that expertise to assist us. Right now they help us as much as they possibly can, but they do not have to, and that's the problem we have. Without having a federal indigenous fire marshal's office that is mandated to assist first nations, we are left with good intentions, whereas we need law. We need something where, so that if we need help, here's who we call. That's what we don't have right now.

That relationship with our Ontario fire marshal is what has helped us to grow and become what we have become, to put ourselves to task, to hold ourselves to a higher standard, and to try and make things better for our community.

The problem I have with the fires happening in our community right now is.... In the municipal sector, the incidence of fire is decreasing, and it's because fire prevention is in place, good things are happening, and building codes are being followed. In our community, which is the most populated first nation in Canada, I've been in 26 fires in the past 12 months. I've been in 26 burning houses in the past 12 months with a number of my firefighters. I know municipal firefighters in services such as Toronto's who haven't even been in a fire in three years, so that gives you a bigger understanding of how bad the problem is for first nations fires in Ontario.

I'm sorry to go off a little bit from your question.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Amos. You've run out of time.

We'll move on to MP Viersen.

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

Thank you to our guests for being here today.

I guess I'm just going to push back on my colleague there a little bit. He seemed to be questioning where this was coming from. I know that my party was in power at the time. Last year my colleague John Brassard asked a question about the data, because he was concerned about it as well. The current minister said that it was to reduce recording requirements. That was why it was dropped at that point. It doesn't seem like this current government—even last year, when we were asking about it—is interested in returning to requiring the data to be recorded. That becomes a little bit of a capacity thing, depending on where you live in the country, in terms of how able you are to report. I know that our first nations communities are already some of the communities that have to do the largest report of reporting already. We hear that over and over and over again. In any case, one of the reasons we don't have the data is that it's no longer required to be reported.

Mr. Miller, one of the things I was very happy to hear—Mr. Peters, I'd like to hear from you as well—was with regard to the integration with communities next door. In my riding in Alberta, for example, all 14 first nations are what we would call remote communities. They're stand-alone communities in the wilderness. They all have some sort of fire program in place. They communicate fairly well with the local municipality, often because they're the only resource on the ground in that particular area. They're also contracted by the Alberta government for forest firefighting services, so there's that interplay as well.

We heard from one of the B.C. chiefs that they have 400 firefighters in their band. They fight forest fires all summer long. I'm wondering if you have some comments about the integration of firefighting services across the country. I understand the need for specific building code requirements for reserves and things like that. However, I would like to see our firefighting services integrated, with just one firefighting service across the country and the same kind of standards. We always hear about jurisdictional issues when it comes to radios and communicating and equipment that doesn't overlap. You're suddenly forced to work together and you have different equipment that you don't know how to use. I think everybody would like to see a seamless integration if you're a firefighter in Canada, whether you're an indigenous firefighter or a non-indigenous firefighter or a municipal firefighter.

I'll start with Matt and then move to Allan for some comments on that.

● (1635)

Mr. Matt Miller: I totally agree that seamless integration between the services needs to be occurring on a more regular basis. In the past 18 months, I've been to 97 of the 134 first nations in Ontario. I've videotaped it, I've pictured it, I've seen it, and I've asked questions among all those different first nations we've gone to. I've found that the training aspect is lacking.

Within our first nation, we have a very strong relationship with our municipal neighbours. We base all of our training and our tactics and our strategy on how we fight fire based on science that we've learned, science that's acceptable across the board in fire services in North America. The reality of that existing in other first nations in Ontario is very low. I only know of two other first nations that train to that standard. The accessibility to training for first nations in our area of Ontario is very, very limited. Many first nations are taken advantage of by substandard training from private companies that come in and offer the world, take a paycheque, and then completely disappear.

That's one of the things we identified within the Ontario first nations fire protection strategic plan, which I'll forward to you guys. I was going to send it beforehand. We took all the information that we gathered from those community visits, meetings, and interactions and compiled it into a strategic plan for the Ontario region. It identifies that one of the biggest things is training. If you're a firefighter in rural Ontario, you still need to have the abilities of the firefighter in the urban centre or in the first nation centre and be able to provide that service at the same level.

Mr. Allan Peters: For the Atlantic region, there is no written documentation that says there is mutual aid for the neighbouring community, but there's word of mouth. In Elsipogtog, we do have an agreement with Rexton and Richibucto, and we work pretty well with the surrounding communities. We respond if they need help and they respond if we are stuck.

A lot of the training that was picked up by our own department was through the fire marshal's office and by attending the New Brunswick Association of Fire Chiefs, the Office of the Fire Marshal, and the New Brunswick Community College, which all had something to say. At least for us anyway, they welcomed us into the association, and we were accepted and we were able to get training. In the Atlantic region, I'm proud to say that Elsipogtog has the highest number of qualified Firefighter 1 and Firefighter 2 members. In the Atlantic region all the other provinces are lucky to have one or two people who have level 1, but the numbers are low. We do need serious training in the Atlantic region for the other communities.

Mr. Arnold Viersen: I know that in my own community, one of the biggest problems with firefighting services is to get volunteers to be firefighters. It sounds like that is a similar problem for you as well.

Do you have anything to offer us that maybe the federal government could offer to help inspire people to become volunteer firefighters?

● (1640)

Mr. Matt Miller: I'd like to quantify that a bit more. In the municipal sector there is difficulty retaining volunteers, and the first nations sector is 10 times worse. The reason it is 10 times worse is that we don't get treated as well as our municipal brothers and sisters. We don't have the ability to retain volunteers and to be able to say, “We'll provide you with this training if you stay with us. We'll support you when you see your cousin has passed away in front of you. We'll be able to provide support mechanisms for you and your family to deal with the tragedies that you have to deal with on a regular basis.” We do not have those resources in the first nations fire protection sector, and it's something that is lacking and needs to be addressed.

As far as retention goes, we do live in a different social world now. People aren't beating down the doors to become volunteer firefighters and to run into burning buildings anymore, but for me, what I have just mentioned to you are some of the biggest things facing our community and many of the other Ontario region first nations.

The Chair: We need to move on.

The final round of questioning goes to MP Saganash.

Mr. Romeo Saganash (Abitibi—Baie-James—Nunavik—Eeyou, NDP): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you to all of our guests today for this first panel.

I'm happy I heard a lot of things that both of you, Mr. Miller and Mr. Peters, mentioned that I can relate to. I come from a northern remote community, and we'll be hearing from the fire chief in my own community later on.

I do understand that the data problem is a serious one and that we need to get on with that as well if we are serious about protecting our people and our communities.

You mentioned the need for a legislative framework for communities to report the number of fires they have in their communities, the casualties and so on and so forth. The need for a national strategy plan is important as well. I can totally relate to that.

I want both of you to address some of the other challenges that communities face. I'm glad you mentioned that you visited many of the Ontario communities as well. I've been to the Maritimes. I visited your own community, as a matter of fact, last summer. I was greeted with a box of lobster when I arrived.

With respect to the other challenges, such as infrastructure and equipment and all of the other resources, as well as training, I totally agree with you in that respect. You seem to be very well organized in your own community.

What are some of the remaining challenges that you can think of? This study is going to lead to recommendations to the government, and we want to make sure those recommendations are to the point in terms of our communities' needs.

Mr. Matt Miller: My wife is actually from a remote first nation, and I used to work for Ornge air ambulance, which was the air ambulance provider for the fly-in communities in Ontario. That's where my initial contact was made, so when I visit those communities, it's something I take to heart.

The challenges they face in the north are significantly more difficult than what we would see in the semi-remote areas or in the central or southern Ontario regions. When something as simple as a light bulb burning out on your fire truck happens, it's not an easy matter of going to the local store and grabbing a light and putting it back in your truck. In the north, it takes weeks to get those pieces or parts that you need for your emergency vehicles. If there's a fire and the fire suit or bunker gear suit that we wear becomes damaged, when we send it off in the south, we get it back in two days, and it's repaired. In the north, you're looking at weeks and you're looking at thousands of dollars.

The barriers they have to being able to provide adequate service in the remote communities and semi-remote communities seriously need to be looked at and addressed from a fundamental financial support and funding standpoint. You have to consider the costs that are associated with those basic requirements.

I used to live in Moosonee when I worked for Ornge. It was a fly-in community, or you could get there by train. A Delissio pizza was $25. That's just a pizza. That's not even a fire helmet, fire gloves, or a fire hose. That's a pizza. When you get into the communities further north, such as Peawanuck, which is one of the most northern communities in Ontario, a $100 pair of fire gloves is going to cost $600 or maybe even more. That's something that needs to be considered.

I want to address the training aspect, because from all the discussions I had with the different remote and semi-remote communities, I noted there are trust issues. We talk about trust and truth and reconciliation here. Because of all of the different things that have happened to us as first nations people through all these different generations, we have trust issues not only with governmental agencies but with each other, within communities. For us to rebuild those relationships.... It took me a number of times and many hours of discussion to get people to actually believe that I genuinely cared. If that's the aspect of problems that I'm running into, from a training standpoint, I can't just go and grab a couple of first nations people from a first nation community, bring them down south, train them, and think it's going to be good. That relationship needs to be built there. That mentorship needs to be involved. Trust needs to be built up again.

With respect to comfort, many of the people we talked to don't want to go to Thunder Bay because of the racism in that city. This is what they've told me. I've lived in Thunder Bay myself, so when they tell me that they would like to do training in a first nation, we say okay and ask what we can do. We have a training academy in Six Nations, but it's way down south. Our recommendation was to have three different training sites in first nations communities—one southern, one central, and one in the Sioux Lookout area, such as at the Lac Seul First Nation.

Many of the people we talked to were very comfortable with going to another first nation to receive training from a professional first nation person. These are things that we looked at and addressed, and we put them into our strategic plan.

I don't want to go over my time in answering your question.

● (1645)

Mr. Romeo Saganash: Mr. Peters, would you comment?

Mr. Allan Peters: The underfunding is a big thing in the Atlantic region when you look at the fire stations, the fire trucks, and even the turnout gear. Some of the reserves have to pull the fire truck out first and then let their firefighters run in to get to their turnout gear. Even with that situation, you're exposing the firefighters to carcinogens. Most likely, we're going to be having cancer. We're exposing them to that. In responding to the fires and returning with the turnout gear, there are proper techniques that are supposed to be followed. We are bringing in carcinogens from house fires with a combination of elements that are burning in there. It's in your turnout gear, and you're exposing the station to it.

With the lack of funding, we don't have the luxury of following the standard operating guidelines, the SOGs, that have to be followed. The Atlantic region is seriously underfunded. There are stations with fire trucks that are 20 or 30 years old. They try to make do with what they have. When you come out and see something outside, you notice that they have modern equipment, and you can see how far behind we are.

We're slowly getting up. With the enthusiasm of some of the new firefighters who come into the game, you have people sparking up the old guys again, and they're getting into fundraising. They are able to bring a little more equipment in. After a while, though, the trend starts again. This group gets old, and you're working on the new ones again.

Mr. Romeo Saganash: I was wondering if we got a copy of the strategic plan of the chiefs of Ontario. Did we receive that? I'd like to see a copy of it.

The Chair: Have we received a copy of the strategic plan?

Mr. Romeo Saganash: It was referred to—

Mr. Matt Miller: I'll forward it.

The Chair: Good.

Thank you so much. You've provided a lot of information from your respective areas. My sincere thanks for that.

We're going to call the next panel forward so that we can continue with the hearing. We're going to pause now.

● (1645)

(Pause)

● (1650)

The Chair: Welcome. I'm pleased you're here. I see that we have an intervention by MP Anandasangaree.

Mr. Gary Anandasangaree (Scarborough—Rouge Park, Lib.): Madam Chair, I wonder if we could go to seven-minute presentations by our panels and maybe a five-minute round for us, since we don't have a lot of time.

The Chair: Do we have agreement on seven-minute presentations?

Go ahead, Ms. McLeod.

Mrs. Cathy McLeod (Kamloops—Thompson—Cariboo, CPC): If the presenters can do that, we would welcome additional information, which we'll make sure to read. Unfortunately, the votes got in the way. If there is something critical, I don't want to hang tight to that.

● (1655)

The Chair: Go ahead, MP Saganash.

Mr. Romeo Saganash: I sort of feel bad for our witnesses to try to limit their interventions, especially knowing that Mr. Saganash Stringer drove from Waswanipi to here last night. That's a pretty long drive just to....

The Chair: If possible, try to tighten your presentations.

The Micmacs are on the phone. Franklin Condo, are you there?

Mr. Franklin Condo (Director of Public Security, Micmacs of Gesgapegiag): Yes.

I'm Franklin Condo, public security director for Gesgapegiag.

The Chair: Welcome. We're here in Ottawa on the unceded territory of the Algonquin people. We're going to begin the presentations, which will be of approximately seven minutes. Try to keep it tight. If you have a longer brief or a brief at all, please submit it. You can use email or leave it with the clerk. We would appreciate it.

Starting out, we have the Cree First Nation, represented by Timothy Saganash. That's seems to be a very common last name.

Mr. Timothy Saganash Stringer (Fire Chief, Cree First Nation of Waswanipi Fire Department): Thank you so much, Madam Chair, for the honour of being here. *Wachiya*. Hello. *Bonjour*.

I'm presenting here today from the Cree First Nation of Waswanipi. I had a PowerPoint presentation, but I only found out on Thursday night about this, so although I did the best I could, I failed to submit it on time. I'll be just looking over notes. I gave a copy to Mr. MacPherson to hand out after the fact.

My name is Timothy Saganash Stringer. I'm the fire chief of Waswanipi. I've been the fire chief there for five years. I've been a certified firefighter for 15 years, levels 1 and 2, and I also have extensive training in instructing and in fire officers, which are very important courses.

In 2003, I graduated in Alberta. I'm from Quebec. The reason it was Alberta is that in Quebec all the courses are mainly in French. As Crees, we were looking for somewhere that has a very good rescue equipment that we could actually get our hands on and actually get the real feeling of experience. We went to Lakeland College in Vermilion, Alberta. They have a program called “fire etc.” That's why I graduated from over there.

It's been a goal of mine to be a firefighter since I was a kid, so here I am today, in the big House. Thank you again for having me. I'm honoured.

In Waswanipi, we have a mission statement that we let all our volunteers know, protecting our community any time, any place. The mission statement is this: “Through dedication and professionalism, members of the Waswanipi Fire Department cares and protects lives, property, and environment of our community through incident response, comprehensive training, public education, and fire prevention.”

The community of Waswanipi is located in northern Quebec, just north of the 49th parallel. We're a population of about 2,500 people, give or take, with doctors, teachers, and people who come in from out of town to help. Our department consists of five full-time employees—the fire chief, deputy fire chief, fire prevention officer, and also two captains—as well as contracted employees whom we hire through a special program. As well, we have 15 volunteers.

I wish I could put up the map here. I have a nice little map. You'll get an idea of it after the fact. We're about 122 kilometres away from a community that's south of us, so incident response time in getting the support that we need is too late. They're going to show up and help us pick up our hoses at that point. There's another community, Chapais, which 93 kilometres north. Again, if there's a burning house or we need more personnel to help us out, we're on our own. We're really on our own.

I also have another nice picture of the whole province of Quebec, showing all the native communities, the Cree native communities. Whapmagoostui is an isolated community. It's conjoined with the Inuit. There's no road to get there at this point. As you can just imagine, when they have a vehicle they need repaired, well, they have to send it on a boat and wait three or four months till it comes back. That's one big.... We need to fix something up for that.

You have to fly to get to the next community, Chisasibi. A couple of more hours away you get Wemindji, and a couple more hours away, Eastmain. Inland you have Nemaska. Again, on the southern part of James Bay, we have Waskaganish. We're the community that's the farthest south in the Cree nation, Waswanipi. Just northeast of us are Oujé-Bougoumou and Mistissini. We're all about two or three hours away from each other.

For my drive, to get here today, it took me seven hours. All the manufacturers are based around Montreal, Ottawa, and Toronto. Every time somebody has a truck to fix—well, as you can imagine, if you're living way up north, it's 15 to 20 hours to come down with a fire truck. As the presenters before me said, my fellow Mi'kmaq brothers, to change a light bulb is a lot more complicated than it seems. It's a big task. It shouldn't be that hard; unfortunately, but it is.

My fire department consists of four emergency vehicles: a first responder pickup truck; an aerial ladder truck, the year 2011; a 2000 pumper truck, which has a lot of water within it; and a rescue truck that has a bunch of emergency tools. We're very fortunate in my region.

● (1700)

I can imagine that in other departments.... I've visited other departments in Canada where they have just a simple garage with one truck they don't touch, or three bunker gears, and that's it. That's their fire department. We've benefited by having a bit of support from the federal government and support from our regional government because of the mining, the forestry, and the hydro.

Our fire department has other needs that we have identified. All the fire chiefs in my region get together at least four times a year just to go over problems and our goals to make our service better. We identified certain needs, such as rescue boats. Those are hard for us to obtain. We have big lakes. James Bay is right on the coast, and we don't even have rescue boats.

As for Ski-Doos, some departments have fought and got them, but our department is fighting to try to get that type of rescue equipment. It's hard. We get a lot of snow. Winter is nine months a year for us.

There's also a need for four-wheelers. A lot of the roads are rural and they're not paved. To get to people's camps for search and rescue we need four-wheelers to try to access them with rescue sleds.

We also need specialized all-terrain vehicles. There are a variety of what they could be, along with their equipment. We need a tanker truck that could hold lots of water. We're fortunate in our community to have hydrants, but they don't go down the road to our dump. We have a lot of dump fires, unfortunately, and forest fires in the area.

I have a nice picture of my organogram—fire chief, deputy fire chief, fire prevention officer, two captains, two lieutenants, and the volunteer firefighters below that—but when I first started, I was alone. I was one person doing fire prevention and the one person doing the maintenance on the truck. I fought with my band—not fought; we worked together—and it was beneficial to employ more people so we could take proper care, do proper training, and also serve the public in fire prevention. These are very important, in my opinion.

I'm so thankful for volunteers, although just like the community that presented before, it's hard to recruit volunteers from 2,500 people. Not everybody wants to be a firefighter. We're constantly trying to encourage people and we try to work with them and try to give them prizes to stick with us, but retaining them afterwards is another challenge on its own. They try it for a year and then decide it is not for them. We need the manpower in our departments.

I was outside a few minutes ago talking with my captain, Terrence Dixon. He was telling me that they're asking us to do certain services in the community, but we don't have anybody on call. There are just four of them right now. We shouldn't have this problem.

In my department, out of the 23 guys and girls we have—and we do have girls as well, which we're very proud of—most of us are under the age of 25. Saying they've been a firefighter for five-plus years is rare in my department. I've also worked on the south shore of Montreal, in Saint-Basile, and there are firefighters there who are 30, 40, and 50 years old, and those veterans taught a lot of the young guys. That was most important, and I wondered why.... I have tried recruiting people with licences because there are only five of us in the department who have licences, and it's very difficult. It's another challenge in the north to have people to go—it's an hour and a half away, one-way—to get their licence. You have to do that twice, plus the amount of time to do your driving course. Today when you go to the driver's bureau, you have to do all the courses before you actually.... It's a lot of time, it's a lot of money, and it's far, so that's why it's another struggle for us to get licences in the communities.

I have a slide here that shows the average salary of fire chiefs or fire personnel in general. We're $20,000 below the minimum salary in a lot of these positions. Why does a 40-year-old not want to work at the fire department? Because we can't even pay him. He can be a janitor somewhere else and make more money, unfortunately. At $15 an hour, you put your life on the line and absorb all these toxins. You're essentially going to join the fire department and get cancer when you retire, unfortunately. That's the new....

I'll try to speed it up. I have a list of my certified—

● (1705)

The Chair: You've actually got to wrap it up, buddy.

Mr. Timothy Saganash Stringer: I've put down some of the challenges from the very start.

The 911 system is not in place in our communities. You have to know the number of the fire department, the police department. If you're driving through a community and you're not aware of the numbers, how are you going to be safe if you have an accident? If you call 911, you're going to have somebody come from three hours away.

I wish I had more time with all of you today.

The Chair: We're going to have some more time with questions.

Mr. Timothy Saganash Stringer: Perfect. Okay.

The Chair: Keep that thought, because you have a lot of very excellent points.

Let's move on to the second presenter. I'm sorry to rush, but we need to hear from the Micmacs.

Franklin, are you still there?

Mr. Franklin Condo: Yes, I'm here.

The Chair: Okay, go ahead.

Mr. Franklin Condo: You guys caught me off guard because I didn't know what this conference was for, but I'll do my best to do my presentation.

I'm Franklin Condo, and I have 25 years in policing and 23 years as a volunteer firefighter. We started in 1995 with a small group of guys. We had training. People came down from Quebec after we had a tragic fire and a lady and a couple of her children died in the fire because we didn't have a fire department back then. It was a neighbouring town, Maria, that was covering our sector, and it took them about 15 to 20 minutes before they could get over here.

After that, it was decided we were going to establish our fire department, and from there we trained 10 volunteer firefighters. After that, they slowly had no interest, and then we tried to recruit volunteer firefighters, but we're having a hard time. We're back to 10, but they're not all fully trained, because they had to train us too over here. We had problems getting the training in an English community over here. We can't go to the French training. There's the possibility of taking the training in French, but our guys over here don't speak French, so that's another barrier we're facing.

We have a fire chief. He's a part-time fire chief, but when there's a fire, he's there, and he's also our fire prevention officer at the same time. We don't have somebody specified for fire prevention, and our population is about 700. We have a tanker that has been there since 1995, and I don't know what the lifespan of the fire truck is. I think it's a 20-year span, so we're facing having to change the fire truck.

Equipment-wise, we purchased new bunkers not too long ago, maybe last year, because those too were outdated. I think we'd had them since 2003, so we had brand new bunkers last year. Other than that, we've got a fire station. It's a small fire station, but it does the job.

Another problem we're facing is that we have two ends of our community that have no fire hydrants, and we don't have a tanker. The only fire truck that we have is the 900-gallon fire truck, and 900 gallons.... They say it's 100 gallons per minute, so we only have nine minutes to fight the fire. Then we have to call the neighbourhood town, which is Maria, but by the time they get there, it could be 15 to 20 minutes. In the meantime, if we use all those 900 gallons in nine minutes, by the time they get here, we didn't have water for 11 minutes.

That's about it for me.

● (1710)

The Chair: Okay. We'll be back to you with questions very soon.

Let's have our last presenter, Chief Matilda Ramjattan.

Welcome.

Chief Matilda Ramjattan (Lennox Island First Nation): Thank you, Madam Chair, for the invitation to appear before the committee. I would like to acknowledge unceded Algonquin territory.

I am Chief Matilda Ramjattan. I'm from the small community of Lennox Island. Our membership is a little over 1,000. About half of those live on reserve. Of two first nations in P.E.I., Lennox Island is one.

Our community has three reserves. One is populated. Abegweit has three reserves, and all of them are populated. We are on the western part of the island, and they're in the eastern part of the island. They do not have fire safety service within the community. They do have volunteers in other communities.

In my community, we've had a fire department for about 40 years. It started with just little backpacks of water. After a house fire burned down a home that had 13 living there, who then were all homeless and were put throughout the island, the men decided that they had to do something. They were able to start their fire department with a few men with just those backpacks.

In our community now, we have 24 volunteer fire members altogether. Fourteen of them are medical first responders. We have two certified pump operators. We have three licensed drivers, which again is an issue, because our community is a fishing community, and if they're fishing.... Somebody has to drive that truck, but we only have the three drivers. We have one level 1 firefighter, so training is definitely an issue. The fire chief is working towards his hazardous material awareness training, because when he did his training, it wasn't mandatory, but now it is.

We definitely have to work on some infrastructure as well. We also need some other things, such as a new pumper truck and an all-terrain vehicle.

I will show you a quick picture of our community. It's shaped like a pork chop. I'll show you where most of us live. We would like to have some fire roads, because although there are walking trails, we can't get our truck back there. We're an island off P.E.I., and the closest city is about 55 kilometres away. We do operate with mutual aid within 50 kilometres around us.

Our medical first responders have increased from three to 14, and we do have men and women. Last year, they responded to about 200 calls, with 30 calls in terms of mutual aid. The thing is that our people are volunteers, and resources for them, as much as they want to help.... We are an isolated community. If we don't help, we won't get help. You know from other communities that this has happened; they will not respond because somebody didn't pay the cheque or something, and funding was held up somewhere.

In the summer, spring, and fall, it's easy to get access to our community, but we are an isolated community in the winter months. Even our bridge sometimes will fill up so much that we can't get off the reserve, so trying to have an emergency response to medical situations can be challenging in the winter months.

A lot of the issues that have been spoken about already are ours as well, but I wanted to make a note too that it's not only about fire safety. It's about emergency management. In terms of emergency management in the Atlantic, with the Mi'kmaq Confederacy of PEI we had a health emergency management coordinator who helped to build capacity within our communities. We also went to the housing and infrastructure network at the Atlantic Policy Congress level, which helped build the capacity of all the first nations in the region.

● (1715)

That funding was cut, so there is nobody in that position now. There is none. I believe that could be a real asset to help build capacity within the region in emergency management and health emergency management. We had to activate a shelter back in 2010, when we had water surge and an ice storm, as you know. We had to put our warming centre up, and 24-hour care is really difficult when you don't have the trained individuals for that situation. That's what we found. In terms of infrastructure, we used the school, which was identified in our emergency plan. However, when we actually went to use it and we had all those people in there, the bathrooms were not flushing because the power was out and our generator kicked in for just the minimum. Those sorts of things will be an issue, because when the power goes out, there's minimal electricity, just to keep the heat and lights on, and the plugs don't work. You have all these children and elders in there, and it's a recipe for disaster.

Even though we are talking about fire safety overall, at a higher level of thinking, emergency management in general needs more capacity building in our communities, and we need someone in our communities to do that.

In my community, we don't have a salary for our fire department. We get $25,000 for our fire department. That's pretty much it. That has to cover the lights and the heat and maintenance of the truck and what have you. We need a new building.

There are issues that are building up. We're trying to do the best we can with what we have, but we definitely need help, because we're just going to collapse in on ourselves. As this man just stated, we're trying our best with what we have, but eventually volunteers may give up on us, and that's something we have to keep our attention on overall.

The Chair: Thank you.

Chief Matilda Ramjattan: Is my seven minutes up? I tried to speak really fast.

The Chair: You were trying so hard that you got a little bit extra.

Let's go on to the questioning. We're running out of time. Unless we go over by five minutes, we will not be able to make the 5:30.

● (1720)

Mr. Gary Anandasangaree: Madam Chair, I'm going to suggest we do five-minute rounds and that beyond 5:30 there no longer be any votes or motions. There are some members who have to go to other engagements.

The Chair: Okay. We're starting out with the member, so MP Anandasangaree, go ahead, please.

Mr. Gary Anandasangaree: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you, panel, for joining us. I know we were delayed because of the vote, so I do apologize for the time limitation today.

I want to talk about the proposed indigenous fire marshal. I'd like to get your input in terms of what you think the role would be and how you feel that a fire marshal's office could support the local work that you do. The question is for all of you.

Mr. Timothy Saganash Stringer: I think there's a great benefit to having an indigenous fire marshal. That person could do a lot of case studies and check across the board in Canada, not just in certain regions, and see if we're meeting at least the minimum requirement as an essential service. I'm sure it's off balance right now.

Some departments are way ahead and some are way behind, so maybe that could be one of the main things. Once we get to that minimum, we have to continue to strive and improve and get better and better and make it safer for all communities across Canada. Native or non-native, it doesn't matter. We all deserve to have the minimum protection and to make sure that we can sleep and that our kids are going to wake up the next day.

Chief Matilda Ramjattan: I think that having a marshal would definitely help in terms of providing some standards for fire safety in the homes and also with how we can support our staff. When we had a fire in our health centre, the staff didn't know how to take the fire, so we had to send the fire chief in to teach them.

In terms of standards, I know that one of the fires we had was inside the roof of the house. We weren't able to replace the furnace because we couldn't get a furnace in. There was only a crawl space, so instead of putting a furnace in, we put in those wall heater things. I think that caused overstress on the old wires because it was an older house, 30 years old. Putting these new things in put more pressure on, and the fire started off in the roof.

I think those kinds of things help us raise our awareness. Even in planning, our first nations need to be able to know what to keep in mind when we're building something or the things to keep an eye out for if we're upgrading our older houses. Definitely, we need standards.

Mr. Franklin Condo: Yes, it's also to improve the standards in terms of the building codes and fire codes. As of now, I don't think we are respecting fire codes in any public buildings or even in personal houses. There are things that gather up at the door entrance. When you go to a gathering, you don't see any exit signs or anything like that. Also in wintertime, they all push the snow to the doors. If we had a fire marshal who comes and gives standards, we'll have no choice but to follow them.

The Chair: We're moving on.

We are going to MP Waugh.

Mr. Kevin Waugh (Saskatoon—Grasswood, CPC): Thank you, Madam Chair.

I want to thank each and every one of you for being here.

One of the things we haven't talked about a lot in this place.... Some of you have brought it up.

You have 14 medical responders. You're lucky, Matilda.

● (1725)

Chief Matilda Ramjattan: Five of them are on crutches right now. I don't know how much more we can take out of them. We take what we can get.

Mr. Kevin Waugh: In terms of hazard training, some have talked about the cancer, the asbestos, the stuff you are exposed to when you go into a building. You have no idea what chemicals you have there.

We're dealing with this municipally, and they're there 24-7, but you don't have a lot of staff.

I just want to say, Timothy, your mission statement is great—protect any time, any place. You're putting people first, but sometimes we need to put our firefighters first, and I'm really concerned with this.

I want all of you to comment. We'll start with you, Timothy, because we see too many people at 42 and 43 in obituaries that say "I was a firefighter for 15 to 20 years."

Mr. Timothy Saganash Stringer: Every year the NFPA makes standards. We're starting to have all kinds of different statistics that go back to the 1950s. Before, there was more of a mental thing for firefighters: "I'm tough. I can go in there without SCBA on." People started saying, "Hey, he's not around anymore. Why? Must have been that time...." All these statistics are coming up, and they're trying to improve on the equipment, even the balaclava you put over your head. Now they're putting a liner within that piece of equipment. Of course, they made a modification to improve it, so the price of that item just went up four times. Again, it comes down to price. You have to invest in the safety of your firefighters.

The first thing I did was I made sure that all the bunker gear in my department was up to code. At least 20 bunker gear were out of service, meaning there's a 10-year expiry date. A lot of them were past 12 or 15 years. My first action was the health of my own guys and making sure they had a proper breathing apparatus that was getting hydrostatically tested, the proper equipment to resist fires and chemicals. All that costs money. In everything you try to do, if you want to have more people involved, it costs money. If you want to have equipment that works, equipment that's efficient, it costs money.

Mr. Kevin Waugh: It's pretty hard to volunteer when you know you may not have the correct equipment, right?

Mr. Timothy Saganash Stringer: Yes, and when we give this training, we let them know there's cancer, so I think that might be a reason that's scaring a lot of volunteers away. Why should I volunteer for something that's going to hurt me in the long run?

Chief Matilda Ramjattan: I know in our community, we've had issues with just trying to keep our SCBAs for the firemen to breathe. We had a system, a cascade system, a 1986 model, but it has been just recently put out of service by the inspector who comes by. He said, "Whoa, you can't be using that." We now depend on the next department to help us to get oxygen. It costs them $1,000 just to replace theirs. If they have to do calls, then they want to make sure that they have it, so they don't want us to fill up there anymore, and we have to go further.

Definitely, it's safety first. We say "safety first", but really, how much can we be safe? In our communities we're saving our grandmothers, grandfathers, uncles, aunties, maybe our own children, and it's a very tight community. We're going to do it anyway to save our children and save our families, but we shouldn't have to be put in that position of being at risk.

The Chair: Franklin is back on the call.

Mr. Kevin Waugh: Franklin, we're just talking about the hazards of being a firefighter. We're seeing more chemicals. A lot of fire people go into buildings and they have no idea what's there, asbestos and so on. I wrote down here that you're a 23-year volunteer, and you're struggling like everyone else trying to get volunteers. I don't know if you heard my opening statement, but why would I volunteer when I know 10 or 15 years down the line I may have cancer because I volunteered for you?

● (1730)

Mr. Franklin Condo: The fact over here is that we're having a hard time to recruit volunteers because we don't get paid to be a firefighter over here. I think the budget is too low. We don't have the funding to pay firefighters. At first we were getting paid, and after that our bank had stopped everything, and then everybody had no interest, and now they're going off and on. We still have 10 firefighters, but it's off and on, and sometimes we could maybe have three or four. We don't have the 10 at the same time all the time. That's the biggest problem we're facing over here.

Equipment-wise, we had purchased the pumper only last year, and the SCBAs are all brand new. Even though we have brand new equipment, we don't have the firefighters. If there's any major fire, of course in our community there are a lot of bystanders who want to help, but if it comes to a fire or a major thing, there are safety issues that come into consideration, so that's another reason.

Mr. Kevin Waugh: Good. Thank you. My time is up.

Mr. Franklin Condo: As I said, for the fire truck, it's more than a 20-year span, so we're looking at the possibility that if something happens, it could break down during a fire, and that's it.

The Chair: We're going to close with MP Saganash.

Mr. Romeo Saganash: How much time do I have? One minute?

The Chair: We agreed to give you five minutes. Some members have to leave, but you go ahead.

Mr. Romeo Saganash: Thank you, Madam Chair, and I thank the presenters as well. You've touched on a lot of things that the previous panel spoke about, so I think we've covered....

I do want to first mention this, Madam Chair. I think Timothy is the second Saganash who ever appeared at this committee. I know that he looked a bit nervous yesterday when I spoke with him, but allow me to tell him he did okay.

I just have a very quick question about prevention. I know that you guys, Timothy, do prevention in the community, in particular with elders. I told you the story about my mom and the first time she lived in a house. She never knew what a thermostat was, and she put it all the way up. When it got too hot in the house, she would open the windows instead of putting it down.

What kinds of things do you guys do in the community in that regard?

Mr. Timothy Saganash Stringer: Thank you, Mr. Saganash.

Yes, we do have fire prevention programs. We have a fire prevention officer in our community, Mr. John Sanipass, who regrets he couldn't be here today. We can't just give them a pamphlet, because the first language is aboriginal, Cree. All the stuff, the material you can get online, is in English or French. To ask somebody 80 years old to come to the fire hall so that we can teach them something is not right, so we make the effort to go to their doorstep and ask if they will allow us to come in and teach them how to use such things as thermostats. They didn't have thermostats growing up. If you implement that when they're 60 years old, they're not going to be used to it.

Another thing is fire extinguishers. If they don't have fire extinguishers, we bring them in and show them how to use them. Hold this, squeeze that, and aim at the base. That's some of what we do when we do our residential visits. We try to consider our public, whether it's kids, 20-year-olds, or elders.

Another project we were very proud of this past summer was being community fire smart. I don't know if you've heard of that, but we're the first community in Quebec, native or non-native, to be fire smart. That's a pretty big feat. We worked in collaboration with our forest fire firefighting agency in Quebec, which is SOPFEU, *Société de protection des fôrets contre le feu*.

Basically, we went house to house and into people's yards and told them how to pile their wood and make sure their grass is cut. Forest fires are inevitable. They will happen eventually, and they have happened. Yes, knock on wood. There will be a forest fire, and if one occurs, we want to make sure we're prepared. This is something that's ongoing, and I encourage other communities to follow our lead.

I was very fortunate to work with SOPFEU on this, and it's something that I'm very proud of. I'm especially proud of going to the elders. We want the people to help us do it, but if it's an elder, it's different. We went in there and did it for them. We stacked their wood, gave them some quick tips, and off we went.

● (1735)

Chief Matilda Ramjattan: We focus on emergency management and try to promote fire safety. Our fire chief goes into the school and makes himself available, and they do fire drills.

What really gives me fear is that all this that you can see on this map is forestry. I don't have firefighters trained to fight forest fires, and we don't have the necessary equipment. I try to avoid any kind of conversation around that. What do you do? We just pray. Please God, we pray it never does.

Mr. Romeo Saganash: Thank you very much for your presentations.

The Chair: Thank you.

On the line, Franklin, thank you for staying with us. We all appreciate it.

Meegwetch. Bye-bye.

The meeting is adjourned.