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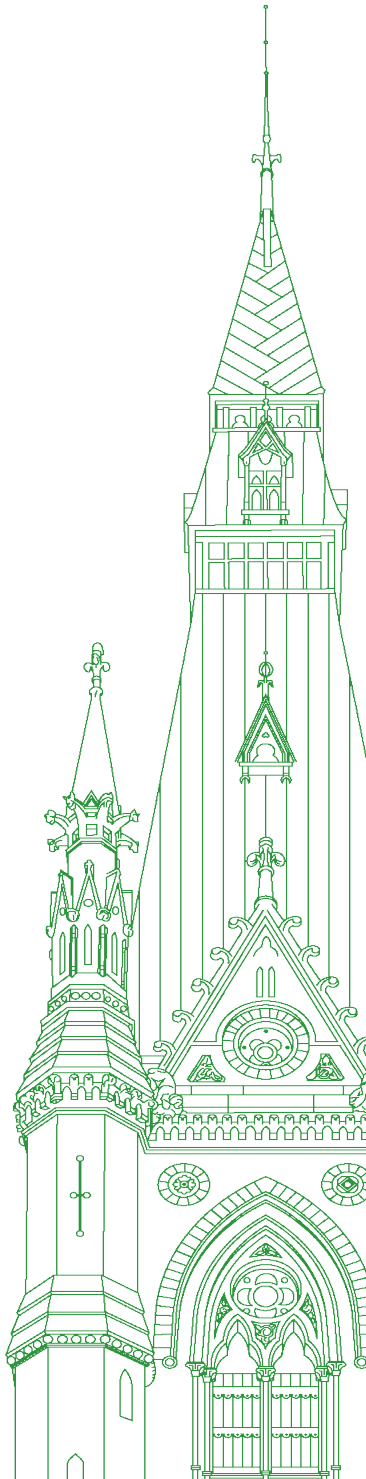

Chair: Mr. Sean Casey

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

Tuesday, December 1, 2020

● (1830)

[*English*]

The Chair (Mr. Sean Casey (Charlottetown, Lib.)): I call this meeting to order.

Welcome to meeting number eight of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills and Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities.

Today's meeting is taking place in a hybrid format, pursuant to the House order of September 23, 2020. Proceedings will be made available via the House of Commons website. So that you are aware, the webcast will always show the person speaking rather than the entirety of the committee.

Witnesses are reminded that they can speak in the official language of their choice. Interpretation services are available. You have the choice, at the bottom of your screen, of floor, English or French.

I understand Mr. Kent is joining us in the room.

Before speaking, please wait until I recognize you by name and please open your microphone. When you don't have the floor, please close your microphone. Please address your comments through the chair.

I would now like to welcome our witnesses. We have Bindu Bonneau, senior director of operations for the Métis Urban Housing Corporation of Alberta, and Robert Byers, President and CEO of Namerind Housing Corporation.

Ms. Bonneau, welcome to the committee. You have five minutes for your opening remarks. The floor is yours.

Ms. Bindu Bonneau (Senior Director, Operations, Métis Urban Housing Corporation of Alberta Inc.): Good evening, everyone. It is my pleasure to be here with you. This is my first time attending this committee.

I have been with the Métis Urban Housing Corporation for the last eight years, and I have witnessed many successes and challenges in this organization while I've been with it.

Métis Housing is made up of two organizations, Métis Urban Housing and Métis Capital Housing. We are affiliated with the Métis Nation of Alberta. These organizations are wholly owned by the Métis Nation of Alberta. Our mandate is to provide affordable, adequate and suitable housing to Métis and other indigenous peoples in Alberta. Between these two corporations, the Métis Nation of Alberta owns about 900 homes across Alberta.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Bonneau, for such a succinct opening statement.

Next, we'll to Mr. Byers for five minutes.

Go ahead, please.

Mr. Robert Byers (President and Chief Executive Officer, Namerind Housing Corporation): I won't be as fast.

Hi everyone, and thank you for inviting me here today to speak on this critical piece missing from the 2017 national housing strategy.

My name is Robert Byers and I am the president and CEO of Namerind Housing Corporation in Regina, Saskatchewan. I am also the chair of the indigenous caucus of the Canadian Housing and Renewal Association, which represents the interests of indigenous housing and service providers across the country.

Namerind is an indigenous non-profit housing provider in Regina, Saskatchewan. Our mission is to provide safe and affordable quality housing and economic development opportunities for indigenous people in Regina.

In 1977, our community determined a great need for affordable housing for indigenous people. Supply was an issue, but so was discrimination. We decided to take care of our own. That goal has led us on a journey that now includes so much more than just a roof over the heads of our tenants. We are giving opportunities back to the indigenous community to create jobs, to create wealth and to create a sense of ownership.

We focus on the importance of each staff member as an integral part of this team: first nations, Métis, non-native and visible minorities. We have also created community partnerships to better the broader Regina community. Together we believe we can provide safe, affordable, self-sustained housing to all those in need.

As of April 2020, Namerind Housing Corporation serves as the community entity for the Government of Canada's Reaching Home homelessness strategy in Regina. We are responsible for both funding streams: the designated communities stream and the indigenous homelessness funding stream.

As a community entity, Namerind is administering more than $5.6 million in Reaching Home funds during the 2020-21 year to support vulnerable Regina populations in gaining and maintaining safe, stable and affordable housing. Namerind Housing, as the Reaching Home community entity, works closely with the Regina homelessness community advisory board. This is out of necessity—79% of Regina's homeless people identify as indigenous.

The indigenous caucus of the Canadian Housing and Renewal Association represents the interests of more than 100 indigenous-led or indigenous-serving housing and service providers from across Canada. In 2018, with funding from Indigenous Services Canada and the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, the indigenous caucus of the Canadian Housing and Renewal Association undertook a study on the state of indigenous housing providers in urban, rural and northern communities.

Its recommendations stand. Virtually every action still waits for a response. I would be glad to provide that to the members of this committee following the meeting.

The “For Indigenous, By Indigenous” report concludes that a strategy is required over and above the national housing strategy already announced in November 2017, and it must include the following key actions: create a “for indigenous, by indigenous” national housing centre; increase the stable, safe, affordable supply of housing by 73,000 units across Canada; increase support for tenants' well-being and long-term success with wraparound services; accelerate action on indigenous homelessness; and put a focus on northern housing.

Those of you who heard me here in June will know that I am a passionate advocate for combining housing for indigenous people with wraparound services. There are no indigenous people who are not affected by the fallout from the residential school system. We need you to be our partner.

Those of you who heard me in June will also know it's colder now in Regina and in Canada's north. It is no fun being homeless in a Regina winter. There is not a thing I can think of that makes this approaching winter a wee bit better than last year for homeless indigenous people in Regina. That's not acceptable.

In June, I identified an opportunity for us to purchase a motel in downtown Regina for $3 million that could be repurposed as housing for homeless indigenous people, with a focus on getting elders and young moms with kids out of the shelter lineups. I'm busy filling out forms and expect to have an application into CMHC's rapid housing initiative. Sometimes the biggest challenge is in finding out where the money is.

● (1835)

I want to thank you again for inviting me here today, and I look forward to answering any questions that you may have.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Byers, and welcome back.

We're going to begin with Mr. Schmale, please, for six minutes.

● (1840)

Mr. Jamie Schmale (Haliburton—Kawartha Lakes—Brock, CPC): Thank you very much, Chair.

Good evening to both our witnesses today. Thank you for your input.

I might start with Mr. Byers, if I could.

Sir, I read your statement on your website, and I have to say I was very impressed. A couple of things jumped out at me—many things did, but two in particular. I'd be remiss, of course, if I didn't point out the foresight your organization had in diversifying your revenue streams through projects like your retail mall and your pharmacy, some of which you touched on in your opening remarks.

Personally, I believe that reconciliation also includes economic reconciliation. It includes self-sufficiency, and I think the government has a role to play where it can assist indigenous communities to create their own jobs, their own wealth, their sense of ownership, some of which you touched on in your opening statement. A lot of it is behind your philosophy, which your organization represents.

The second one seems to be the real sense that your organization isn't just about building houses. It's also committed to building a community as a whole and ensuring there's a strong relationship between indigenous and non-indigenous people. You probably don't know, but I was the critic for Crown-indigenous relations not too long ago, and through that process I became quite aware that we're in a time of change, not just COVID-related, but with Canada's relationship with its indigenous peoples. As you mentioned, CMHC's long-term operating agreements are expiring, and for more communities economic reconciliation and true self-sufficiency are becoming a reality. I think there's a real drive to have strategies that address reconciliation that are truly led by indigenous peoples.

Maybe I'll stop wasting my time talking here and ask you some questions.

With respect to indigenous housing, sir, were you contacted to be part of the national housing strategy?

Mr. Robert Byers: You know what? That's going back a ways and I have trouble remembering. I know that I've talked with Adam Vaughan on numerous occasions. I did play a part in the development of the Reaching Home strategy, and through the indigenous caucus in the Canadian Housing and Renewal Association we certainly made submissions to the federal government regarding that, so directly or indirectly I would say, yes, we were part of that.

Mr. Jamie Schmale: Okay, perfect.

I know you touched on that in your remarks, but could you elaborate on how important economic self-sufficiency and the fostering of community have been to residents of your community? What advice would you give to the government or members of Parliament in general, regardless of what aisle they sit in, to ensure that what you've created could be replicated or offered as a potential path forward to other communities?

Mr. Robert Byers: I think back to what it was like when we got started on this journey. The subsidy that we were receiving from the federal government was decreasing year by year, to where, I believe, we got somewhere just over $100,000 or maybe $150,000 a year. That didn't do it, but we were prepared. We said that we have to do things differently. We said we can't always depend on any order of government; we have to depend on ourselves as well.

We had to do things differently, so we did. We became a part of other things in our community—other things that weren't housing. We sat on boards that were maybe arts. We became members of the chamber of commerce. We sat on that board. We became a part of the community. We felt that if we wanted other people to let us into their community, we'd better be a part of it. We asked a lot of questions, with the hopes that one day somebody was going to ask us. It happened. They started to ask us questions, and we started getting invited to events and things. They were asking where Namerind Housing was; they needed to get us to the table.

It was a long strategy, and it was a slow-moving one, but it's at the point now where we really are included in things in our community.

Most recently, the YMCA had to close down their main building in downtown Regina. We have since gotten a call from the board chair. They want to introduce us to the mayor to see what we can do and to see if we would have a need around homelessness. It just goes to show that being included and being involved in so many things really gives us all an opportunity to make our community better.

It is a challenge being an indigenous-led non-profit organization, and to have people say, “Where is Namerind Housing?” and then to get that call.... When it first started happening, I used to wonder why they were calling us. Now it's at the point where somebody will probably call us on this.

It was part of our plan.

● (1845)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Byers and Mr. Schmale.

Mr. Long has the floor next for six minutes.

Mr. Wayne Long (Saint John—Rothesay, Lib.): Thank you, Chair, and good evening to my colleagues.

Thank you to our witnesses this evening. I appreciate your presentations.

I do have questions for both of you, but seeing as MP Schmale started with Mr. Byers, I'll start with you, Ms. Bonneau.

As an urban indigenous housing provider, can you share what the major barriers have been in your ability to get projects off the ground and to finance them adequately?

Ms. Bindu Bonneau: Thank you for your question.

Actually, we have experienced many challenges during the past 10 years.

Mr. Wayne Long: Tell us about them.

Ms. Bindu Bonneau: Not just our organizations, but our clients have experienced many successes and failures as we navigated through the system and processes. Even though the conversation about adequate and affordable housing is years old, the current pandemic has brought to light that we do not have concrete housing strategies for urban, rural and northern indigenous people in Canada.

There are several people on our wait-list hoping to move into a home one day. Many of them have been on the wait-list for over five years or maybe even longer. Some may have even lost hope that they will ever experience the comfort of living in a house or in a safe house.

This situation is the result of lack of adequate and sufficient housing. The housing stock we own is aged anywhere from 45 to 70 years. Most of those homes require complete refurbishment and many require demolition and rebuilding. We face many challenges while planning to renovate or rebuild these homes. These obstacles are wide-ranging, from financial barriers to transferring these residents to a safe place.

Mr. Wayne Long: I think you'll continue on as I ask these questions, but I just want to get them in.

Can you elaborate on how the national housing strategy has worked, if it has worked at all, for the urban indigenous context? If you have seen success in the national housing strategy, how can we expand upon that with a new, distinct strategy?

Ms. Bindu Bonneau: That is correct.

What support we have seen so far has been in capital investment. As a non-profit organization, we act as an arm of our government to provide affordable and subsidized housing. Providing capital investment is just like hoping your handicapped child will run a marathon. That's how I feel. If you don't support operations, how can you get any return from that capital investment?

That's where we don't see enough support to our operations. We are given millions of dollars to build homes. Okay, we are doing that, but what happens in the next five years when those homes need repair, or in the next 10 years? How do we maintain those homes and maintain those rental subsidies?

Mr. Wayne Long: Okay.

With respect to your experience, what kinds of supports are required to make for successful tenancies among the urban indigenous population?

Ms. Bindu Bonneau: What I have seen is that giving rental subsidies is not enough. There have to be wraparound supports to those people. They require support for the mental health issues they have. They require support around those. They require support on how to parent their little children. They are not working people. They require support to find jobs.

Only when we provide those kinds of supports can we say we are successful; otherwise, capital investment is not going to win any battle.

● (1850)

Mr. Wayne Long: Okay.

Can you describe the needs that currently exist in Alberta for urban indigenous housing?

Ms. Bindu Bonneau: We have seen a huge shortage in the housing inventory. It is inadequate. We see more two-bedroom or three-bedroom homes, when what we need is homes with more bedrooms. This is one need.

The other thing is that we have actually forgotten remote areas. We have provided infrastructure that may be just meaningless. For example, I am from Alberta. Once I went to Conklin, and I was surprised to see a recreation centre worth $30 million built there while people were living in broken trailers. I didn't understand that investment. Who is using that?

Mr. Wayne Long: Thank you, Ms. Bonneau, for those answers.

Mr. Byers, I am going to read a quote from you in an article that I read this afternoon.

> The federal government needs to implement a distinct housing strategy for Indigenous Peoples in urban and rural settings, and that Canadians are in favour of Indigenous Peoples themselves designing and overseeing such a strategy.

Can you just elaborate—very quickly, in 30 seconds—on how you would see that roll out? If you were in control right now, what would be the first thing you would do to start that process?

Mr. Robert Byers: I think I would have almost an indigenous CMHC, one that understood the issues, one that could measure the investments and measure the outcomes and really show a focused difference being made.

Mr. Wayne Long: Okay.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Byers.

Thank you, Mr. Long.

Mr. Wayne Long: Thank you to both of you.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Ms. Chabot now has the floor. You have six minutes, Ms. Chabot.

Ms. Louise Chabot (Thérèse-De Blainville, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

First of all, I hope you can hear me well because on my side, there is a lot of crackling on the line, as we say back home. The problem may be on my side, but the important thing is that you hear me well.

The Chair: Yes. We can hear you clearly.

Ms. Louise Chabot: That's good.

I thank our witnesses for being with us tonight.

My first question is for you, Ms. Bonneau. You have already answered a good part of one of my questions, but I have more.

From what I understand, your organization provides housing for seniors in indigenous communities. There are two or even a few projects. Can you tell us a little bit about the more specific needs of the older indigenous population?

[*English*]

Ms. Bindu Bonneau: Thank you for this question.

Actually, right now what we are dealing with is a shortage of housing, not just for our young people or our students but also for indigenous seniors. We are a Métis organization, and we do not have a Métis-specific senior facility where we provide all the supports to people who need long-term care: people who need level 2, 3 or 4, or people with disabilities who need care. We run two senior facilities. One senior facility where we provide assisted living is owned by the Métis Capital Housing Corporation. That facility is about 50 years old, and we're trying to refurbish it to accommodate the needs of the people who live there. This facility is not suitable to their cultural needs.

The biggest barrier indigenous people face is that the housing they are in today is not culturally appropriate. We do not have housing that is barrier-free. These are the issues our seniors are facing today.

● (1855)

[*Translation*]

Ms. Louise Chabot: Thank you for your answer.

What could we do, Ms. Bonneau? What would the solutions be?

In the specific context of the pandemic, there is much talk about the fragile situation of seniors, whether in terms of health, economic or social issues. If you address the cultural issue, which is indeed specific to these indigenous communities, how could programs support this adaptation to cultural realities?

We are looking to help people and find solutions through the program. Do you have any suggestions for us?

[*English*]

Ms. Bindu Bonneau: That is correct. We can certainly help, and we can certainly suggest what we can do.

I had an opportunity with Alberta Health Services where they asked for a supported-living care facility proposal. We have done that.

However, the problem is that there is so much time required to complete all these proposals and documents. We do that, and then there is no follow-up. A huge amount of time is taken to complete all of these formalities. It is red tape. We do need to reduce this red tape. We need to reduce the time it takes to complete one step to another step and then to another, because the need today for housing is critical for seniors, adults, students and young people. If we reduce the time it takes to complete all the formalities, I think that is where we are going to see the difference.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Louise Chabot: Thank you very much.

Do I have any time left, Mr. Chair?

The Chair: You have two minutes left.

Ms. Louise Chabot: I have two minutes left?

The Chair: No, you have one minute left.

Ms. Louise Chabot: Thank you.

My question is for Mr. Byers.

Greetings, Mr. Byers. Thank you for being here.

The project you are promoting in your communities is quite innovative. You say that you're still encountering problems and in a recent report you outline the types of solutions. I think you'll send us the ones that could be put forward.

Does your organization receive money from the national housing strategy? Do you get any funds from the strategy?

[*English*]

The Chair: Please give a brief answer, Mr. Byers.

Mr. Robert Byers: We don't receive funding, really, from any.... We've received funding as a community entity through the Reaching Home homelessness strategy, but as far as Namerind Housing is concerned, and funding to provide affordable housing, we get revenue from the rent and then from our various social enterprises.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Chabot.

[*English*]

Thank you, Mr. Byers.

Next is Ms. Gazan, please, for six minutes.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Louise Chabot: Thank you.

[*English*]

Ms. Leah Gazan (Winnipeg Centre, NDP): Thank you.

First, I'd like to thank the witnesses for being here today and, of course, it's always nice to see my colleagues.

My questions are for Mr. Byers.

I really appreciate what you were talking about in terms of Regina. I represent Winnipeg Centre, and 70% of the shelterless community, of course, is indigenous. Currently, my community has very similar demographics. You talked about, again, "nothing about us without us". I think I'm agreeing with you in that we are the best at finding solutions for ourselves, understanding our histories and where we come from, so I just want to say that I really appreciate that.

This government promised to release a distinction-based first nations, Inuit and Métis housing strategy, but unfortunately we're still waiting. It was recommended by two of our witnesses at our last meeting that an urban indigenous housing strategy should be developed—something that has not happened. Do you believe that this is needed? What type of funding do you believe would be required to ensure that such a strategy would be sustainable and successful?

I know that Madame Bindu Bonneau spoke about how it's great to have the infrastructure, but where are the operational costs? Can you expand on that, please, Mr. Byers?

● (1900)

Mr. Robert Byers: There are a lot of things going through my head when we talk about that. I'll try not to get too sidetracked. The need for a distinct strategy for us is so important. I know that we've talked about dollars. Off the top of my head, as soon as you said dollars, I just went blank. If we go back to where we talk about the need for 73,000 homes across Canada, billions and billions of dollars are needed over the next, say, 10 years.

I should probably stop there, because I think I would just start to ramble a bit, sorry.

Ms. Leah Gazan: Sure, it's not a problem. I asked that because we talk about how we're all in this together, but we know that indigenous peoples, in particular, were not part of it before COVID. They were already behind, and we know that the impacts of COVID will leave us even further behind.

I know that Namerind Housing Corporation is a Reaching Home community entity for Regina. We've heard that since Reaching Home is mostly proposal-based, it's challenging for organizations, since housing is long-term in nature. It's hard to develop long-term plans when you're doing proposals that last a year or funding that lasts two or three years.

Can you speak about the ways in which Reaching Home could be improved to support organizations like yours to be more sustainable and adequate?

Mr. Robert Byers: I know that what we've been talking about with some of the sub-projects here is the way they write the proposals. If we can change that, then maybe we can have them so that they're renewed year after year so that they don't have to keep writing a proposal. We understand the time and the cost, and being small non-profits, we don't always have the time or the money.

As a community entity, we've been investing a lot of time working with the organizations—the sub-projects, I guess we could call them for now—on a new way of doing things, on a more efficient way. Honestly, I think that COVID.... When I talked earlier to Mr. Long, I talked about doing things differently and being prepared. I think COVID, for us, has really helped us work out efficiencies and ways of doing things differently and better. When we took over, being an indigenous-led organization.... When it's indigenous people leading indigenous people, that's fine, but when indigenous people are leading the community, that's a little bit different. It took harder work and a little extra work, but I really believe that we've reduced, maybe, some fear or some resistance that was community-based or community-wide.

Ms. Leah Gazan: I'm a long-time community advocate as well, and I understand the dynamics of that.

I actually was a vice-principal in a first nations community, where we had to write proposals for things that schools off reserve just automatically got. I found myself spending hours and hours writing proposals, and it took me away from working with the community, so my question is this: How does proposal-based funding negatively impact the ability of indigenous organizations to address housing and homelessness in a meaningful way that is both long-term and sustainable?

Mr. Robert Byers: Well, I think people sometimes get stuck in that one way of doing things. We look after both funding streams, and the indigenous funding stream is larger than the designated community stream. We meet with the designated community people and say, look, your funding is going to be different than it was last year, but we believe it provides you with opportunity to do things differently. We go to the indigenous organizations and say, there's more funding for us now; there's more funding to be more creative so that we can have projects or ideas that are more sustainable. It may be—

● (1905)

Ms. Leah Gazan: I have just one last question.

The Chair: No, you don't.

Ms. Leah Gazan: Oh. I don't. Okay.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Gazan.

Ms. Leah Gazan: I'm sorry. Hopefully, I'll have another chance.

Thank you, Chair.

The Chair: You will have another chance.

Mr. Robert Byers: I'm sorry about that.

The Chair: That's quite all right. She will get another chance.

Go ahead, Mr. Vis, please. You have five minutes.

Mr. Brad Vis (Mission—Matsqui—Fraser Canyon, CPC): Thank you to both witnesses for coming today.

On Saturday, I was running around my hometown of Abbotsford and listening to *The House* on CBC. They were speaking with a Dene first nation in Northwest Territories, with Yellowknives Dene First Nation Chief Ernest Betsina, I believe, and he spoke a lot about a previous program from the 1980s called HAP, whereby the Government of Canada would buy building supplies and supply them to individuals in various first nations in northern Canada to build their own homes, with assistance from experts where needed. The Dene first nation in the radio program spoke about how that gave a sense of ownership to the first nations, and it created a home and got people out of other government programs. There seemed to be a lot of support for this program.

Mr. Byers, are you familiar with HAP, that program from the 1980s?

Mr. Robert Byers: No, sir, I'm not.

Mr. Brad Vis: Okay.

Ms. Bonneau, are you familiar with HAP, that program from the 1980s?

Ms. Bindu Bonneau: I was just born at that time.

Mr. Brad Vis: Okay.

Well, it seemed like it was a wonderful program, because what they also spoke about in the radio program was housing as a matter of sovereignty, and indigenous programs for indigenous people by indigenous people. It seemed to go on this model of reconciliation but also of independence from the federal government.

Given that neither of you have looked at the program, I will save those questions for another witness in the future.

Mr. Byers, what advice would you give the Matsqui First Nation in my constituency, which has recently come into possession of prime commercial land within the city of Abbotsford? What steps could they be taking to make the best investments involving both the commercial and residential spaces that they will invariably be developing?

Mr. Robert Byers: Seeing that I don't know a lot about Abbotsford and I don't know much about the location.... I've always said that I wish we had invested more money in commercial real estate, such as our mall and our pharmacy. Those were great investments for us.

To invest in housing without government funding is tough, because there's no money in affordable or social housing, but there is money in commercial real estate. I think our mall gives us about half a million dollars a year to invest back into affordable housing, so I wish we had a few malls.

For the group in Abbotsford, just looking long-term at investments, really to be a part of the business and—what did we call it, Mr. Long?—economic reconciliation, to be a part of that is a big step in developing and moving forward with affordable and social housing. Those are my beliefs.

Mr. Brad Vis: Do you know of many cases across Canada where first nations are the housing providers to non-first nations?

Mr. Robert Byers: Well, I know we house some non-first nations. I'm sure there are many. I'd be surprised if we were the only one.

● (1910)

Mr. Brad Vis: Okay.

Thank you, Mr. Chair. I'm done for today.

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

Next we have Mr. Dong, please, for five minutes.

Mr. Han Dong (Don Valley North, Lib.): Thank you, Chair.

Good evening to both presenters. It's very nice to have you here. My first question will be for both of you.

How does the availability of funding affect your organization's programs and services for housing indigenous people?

Ms. Bindu Bonneau: As I mentioned earlier, we highly depend on government support for our operations. Right now at Métis Urban Housing Corporation we are running our operations under the operating agreements we have with Alberta Seniors and Housing. These agreements will be expiring come 2022, and we are living in uncertainty right now on how we're going to operate. The need for subsidized housing and affordable housing is not going to deplete anytime soon—or ever—and supporting those families with the rent we offer will not happen if we do not have any operational support from government.

It is not just the families; it is the people who run these programs or organizations. We need capacity. We need to invest in building capacity. That is huge at this time. We need to invest in technology, human resources and those kinds of things. They are directly linked to the delivery of the program. We are highly impacted by those. I would say the life of non-profit organizations will be very short if we do not have support from government.

Mr. Han Dong: Okay.

Mr. Byers, I will ask you the same question. How does the availability of funding affect your organization's programs and services for housing indigenous people?

Mr. Robert Byers: I would say that without investment by the federal government it certainly slows us down. I was just thinking of all the investments we've made. We currently own about half a city block in downtown Regina that sits vacant with a temporary parking lot. We had planned on doing a development there, but as we worked with CMHC on this, we determined that our eyes were too big, I guess. It's not something we can maybe handle.

Honestly, an investment by the federal government is needed when it comes to affordable housing. Our investments are investments that make us money so that we can provide or develop affordable housing in partnership with the federal government.

Mr. Han Dong: Okay.

I want to go back to your response, Ms. Bonneau, about adequate funding. In your view, how does that affect your ability to provide culturally sensitive or culturally appropriate programming?

Ms. Bindu Bonneau: Right now the houses we own were given to us by CMHC. Those homes are very old, maybe 50 to 70 years old. If you were going to convert those homes to meet the cultural requirements of indigenous people, you would have to tear them down. They are full of asbestos. They require a lot of remediation. We're talking huge dollars.

That's where our limitation is. Maintaining those homes and having adequate replacement reserves on hand is really important for us.

Mr. Han Dong: Mr. Byers, I have the same question Mr. Long asked Ms. Bonneau.

Can you describe the current need in Saskatchewan for urban indigenous housing?

● (1915)

Mr. Robert Byers: Specifically to Regina and our organization, we have about 350 families on our waiting list.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Byers.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Chabot, you have two and a half minutes.

Ms. Louise Chabot: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Ms. Bonneau, you provide services in 14 urban centres across Alberta. That's a lot, given all the challenges. Congratulations.

Do needs and realities vary from one centre to another? In other words, are there barriers or challenges common to all these urban settings? Are there, on the contrary, more specific distinctions that really need to be taken into account?

[*English*]

Ms. Bindu Bonneau: Overall, the need of indigenous people is similar, but we do see a difference from location to location, depending on what services are available in that location. For example, we have no housing in Conklin. I keep using this as an example, because I was there a few months ago. It was a very saddening situation to witness how people are living there. If I talk about that community, that community has no grocery store. That community has no water, no power, no roads. It has a huge rec centre and a huge school, those kinds of things.

People face difficulties when they don't have services in place, when they don't have medical facilities, when they don't have one-on-one professional consultation. That's where we face challenges. We do not see those challenges in Calgary and Edmonton, but we definitely face those challenges in remote areas.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Louise Chabot: It's a big challenge.

I understand that these are bilateral agreements on the federal side to support you, to figure out how to better address these big differences, but which change things a great deal for the people who occupy these territories.

Your mandate falls under provincial responsibility, supported, I suspect, by the national housing strategy. Is this going well, is this partnership between the province and the federal government fluid or are there jurisdictional conflicts?

[*English*]

Ms. Bindu Bonneau: We are very grateful for whatever support we are getting from the federal government. We are doing our best to create more housing inventory. Again, to maintain and continuously provide that housing, we need continuous support. That is where a gap lies. If we do not have that support, this gap will not diminish.

The Chair: Next is Ms. Gazan for two and a half minutes.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Louise Chabot: Thank you.

[*English*]

Ms. Leah Gazan: My question is for Ms. Bonneau.

We know that poverty is one of the most violent human rights violations. We know through things like the Indian Act, legislated poverty for indigenous people.... We don't need saving. We need to be provided with the same sort of services so we can be afforded the same human rights as other Canadians.

You spoke about lack of housing support. The Métis Nation of Alberta signed on to a 10-year, $5-million Métis Nation housing accord, which, when you break it down, would equate to approximately $100 per Métis person over a 10-year period. Given the shortage of affordable and accessible social housing, do you think this housing is sufficient to meet the needs of Métis citizens across the Métis homeland?

Ms. Bindu Bonneau: I don't know if this is sufficient or not, but this is a huge support, definitely, in an area where we see a challenge. Here we rely on who is on Métis Nation of Alberta's registry. Not everybody is identifying themselves as Métis. Not everybody is registered with Métis Nation of Alberta. That's where we see challenges, because we are not able to provide support to those people.

Again, we are talking about rural and remote areas where we cannot access those services and where people are facing more challenges.

● (1920)

Ms. Leah Gazan: Over 10 years, $5 million equates to—according to research numbers—approximately $100 per Métis person. Over 10 years, that is $10 a year per Métis person. Do you think that's adequate?

Ms. Bindu Bonneau: I don't know if this is adequate or not. I can't comment on that. The thing is, we are able to provide various supports to Métis citizens who are registered with Métis Nation of Alberta. In Alberta, we are also conducting a province-wide needs assessment, which will also bring to the surface other issues and challenges or barriers that these people are facing so—

Ms. Leah Gazan: I have about 15 seconds left.

Do you think $10 a year over a 10-year period meets the needs of Métis citizens, considering the crisis with regard to affordable and accessible social housing in the Métis Nation?

The Chair: Please give a brief response.

Ms. Bindu Bonneau: No.

Ms. Leah Gazan: Okay. Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mrs. Falk, please go ahead for five minutes.

Mrs. Rosemarie Falk (Battlefords—Lloydminster, CPC): Thank you, Chair.

I want to thank both of our witnesses for being here.

From my very short time here in Ottawa, I do know there is something that I'm not sure Ottawa as a whole recognizes: the difference between challenges that rural and remote areas have and those that urban areas in Canada have. It really is black and white. You can't put something that works in an urban setting into a rural and remote setting. It just doesn't work.

I want to comment on a follow-up question that MP Long had for Mr. Byers.

Mr. Byers, you mentioned an indigenous CMHC-type model. I'm wondering if you would say that there isn't an adequate indigenous lens put on federal programs at the moment. Is that why you might feel that an indigenous CMHC would be beneficial?

Mr. Robert Byers: Yes, I think if we had an indigenous CMHC—as we say in our paper, "for indigenous, by indigenous", led by indigenous people—then we wouldn't have to teach and explain. We're different. Our needs are different. We really need to partner with you folks.

I'm going to put it back to the community entities that we have. We don't have to work with the province on it. Our various provincial governments, if they don't like the government of the day in Ottawa, just fight with it. There has been very little change in Saskatchewan, very little change in the past I don't know how many years. They deny there's a need for affordable housing. They don't want to invest in homelessness—

Mrs. Rosemarie Falk: Do you mean on a provincial level?

Mr. Robert Byers: Yes. They did talk about $20,000. They would give $20,000 towards homelessness. I don't even have words for that.

Mrs. Rosemarie Falk: That's for sure.

I do have another question for you. I know you're in Regina. I'm located in Battlefords—Lloydminster. We're in the same province. I'm wondering if you have this information: How many people do you serve who are from rural and remote, maybe northern Saskatchewan, or maybe even out of province? I do understand you're in Regina, but I do understand—even being in Lloydminster or having Battlefords in my riding—the number of people from rural or remote areas who come into the urban centres. I'm wondering if you have that information.

Mr. Robert Byers: We don't, but there would be a small number who don't come from rural.

Mrs. Rosemarie Falk: Right.

Mr. Robert Byers: There aren't too many second- or third-generation indigenous people living here yet. They're slowly making their way.

● (1925)

Mrs. Rosemarie Falk: You were on our committee last time when we were discussing COVID, so I am a little bit interested to know this. Since the last time you were here at our committee, have the needs changed? Have you noticed that there are more needs, other than due to the weather? I understand that it's colder and windy out, but other than that, what about mental health?

I'm a big believer in wraparound services. I have a background in social work. I understand that they go hand in hand. We can't just give one service, for example housing, and not bring in the other parts. It's one thing to be housed; it's another thing to have your spiritual health, your emotional health and your physical health. I'm just wondering whether you've noticed that things have gotten worse and whether supports are adequate, especially in the pandemic scenario.

Mr. Robert Byers: I would say they haven't gotten a whole lot better. People applied very quickly to our second call for proposals. The one thing that I do know really disappointed me was that there hasn't been an investment in our shelters to get away from a dormitory-type shelter. I think that is so important for the well-being of anybody. You need your space, especially during COVID.

Mrs. Rosemarie Falk: Yes, let alone privacy and dignity...absolutely.

Mr. Robert Byers: Exactly.

Mrs. Rosemarie Falk: Thank you so much. I'm sure that's my time.

Mr. Robert Byers: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mrs. Falk and Mr. Byers.

The last person to pose questions to this panel is Mr. Vaughan, for five minutes, please.

Mr. Adam Vaughan (Spadina—Fort York, Lib.): Thanks very much.

Mr. Byers, when you say 73,000 units of housing, we're looking at three different categories here: urban, rural and northern. Can you break down where you think that should fall among those different categories? Does your report speak to that?

Mr. Robert Byers: Yes, I believe it does.

Mr. Adam Vaughan: Do you know offhand what the breakdown is?

Mr. Robert Byers: No, I don't.

Mr. Adam Vaughan: Okay, I'll review it. I seem to recall seeing it.

When we talk about CMHC programs, one of the challenges is that indigenous housing, especially in urban areas, especially when you're dealing with trauma, often includes things like space for ceremonies, space for communal kitchens, space for healing and traditional medicine and sometimes even sweat lodges on site. Would you recommend that an URN strategy move away from 75% residential and provide a mix that is indigenous-designed but less focused on just residential and more focused on the full suite of services?

Mr. Robert Byers: I guess for me, because of the urgent need for housing and to increase those numbers, even though the cultural part is very important, housing is more important. I would sooner invest in housing. I know how we do things, Adam, and we do all our stuff, our spiritual stuff and our cultural stuff, in a space that's away and behind closed doors. Then we work on the project and on including various people.

Mr. Adam Vaughan: But in terms of making those spaces eligible as part of a project, you wouldn't be opposed to that.

Mr. Robert Byers: No.

Mr. Adam Vaughan: Okay.

In terms of the process, you talk about the need for a compressed approval process but also a culturally aware approval process, which is why it needs to be indigenous-led and indigenous-designed, not just indigenous-managed.

Mr. Robert Byers: Yes.

Mr. Adam Vaughan: In terms of that compressed process, would you recommend block funding for multiple years so that organizations like yours have a runway to evolve projects, rather than having to land all the money at once?

Mr. Robert Byers: Yes, that's what I was talking about, even as a community entity, to have ongoing funding so they can start their project and develop it over the course of the next four years.

Mr. Adam Vaughan: If you have a large site, you can do it in phases and know that the phases are all funded and that they work together.

Mr. Robert Byers: Yes.

Mr. Adam Vaughan: In terms of Reaching Home—and thank you for your contribution on the advisory committee as we put together the national housing strategy—I'm just checking to make sure you saw in yesterday's statement that the base funding of $160 million a year for Reaching Home has been added to for next year by an additional $299.3 million.

Mr. Robert Byers: Wow.

Mr. Adam Vaughan: I hope you know it's there.

Mr. Robert Byers: Yes.

Mr. Adam Vaughan: I'm curious, as the national housing strategy builds with indigenous communities an URN strategy, whether or not you think the Reaching Home dollars should also flow into that to make it a fully integrated housing system.

● (1930)

Mr. Robert Byers: I think it would be nice. Actually, the way I would like it is if funding for indigenous organizations was treated the same way the funding is for the community entity, because what happens is that it comes from the federal government to the provincial government and they decide what to do. It's been very little in Saskatchewan.

Mr. Adam Vaughan: So direct funding with the federal government is better than going through the provinces.

Mr. Robert Byers: I believe so. When I look at the 63 designated communities that get this funding, it seems to go pretty smoothly, at least from our viewpoint. I don't know what it's like from Service Canada—

Mr. Adam Vaughan: No, we're good. I don't hear complaints.

Mr. Robert Byers: For us it's like a dream, but as soon as we involve the province, then it takes another path—

Mr. Adam Vaughan: I hear you.

Mr. Robert Byers: —and it's not always easy.

Mr. Adam Vaughan: Madame Bonneau, I have a quick question.

The distinctions-based funding to the Métis Nation, the $500 million that was pledged two years ago in the budget, is that where you draw the allotment you get for the housing you provide?

Ms. Bindu Bonneau: No, we receive funding from Alberta Seniors and Housing.

Mr. Adam Vaughan: You receive money through the federal-provincial transfer.

Ms. Bindu Bonneau: That's correct. We have two organizations under Métis Urban Housing. We receive funding from Alberta Seniors and Housing under operating agreements. The money that we receive from Métis Nation of Alberta is distributed to Métis Capital Housing Corporation, and we have some programs there through which we provide services to our citizens.

Mr. Adam Vaughan: Would you feel more secure with a distinct funding stream from the federal government that included repair dollars, construction dollars and subsidy and operating agreements as a single funding source, as opposed to having to rely on multiple programs out of the province?

Ms. Bindu Bonneau: That is correct.

Mr. Adam Vaughan: Okay.

Ms. Bindu Bonneau: That would give us more control over how we spend and disburse money.

Mr. Adam Vaughan: Just to be clear, your operating agreement is held by the province, so if you're at risk of losing it, it's a provincial government decision that could cost you that program.

Ms. Bindu Bonneau: That is correct.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Vaughan, and thank you, Ms. Bonneau.

We've reached the end of the hour for this panel.

Mr. Byers and Ms. Bonneau, thank you so much for the work that you do in your respective provinces. Thank you for your testimony here with us. It will be of significant value to our work and to our study. We as a government and as parliamentarians look forward to working with you and seeing you again. You're free to disconnect.

We'll suspend, colleagues, for a couple of minutes while we do a sound check on the next couple of witnesses, and then we'll be back.

We are suspended.

● (1930)

(Pause)

● (1935)

The Chair: We are back in session.

I'd like to welcome our witnesses: Dr. Julia Christensen, associate professor and Canada research chair in northern governance and public policy from Memorial University in the fine province of Newfoundland and Labrador; and Damon Johnston, president of the Aboriginal Council of Winnipeg.

Dr. Christensen, you have five minutes.

Mr. Adam Vaughan: Mr. Chair, I have a point of order.

I recognize that Larry Wucherer, who is one of the leaders in indigenous housing in Winnipeg, passed away recently. I want to pay my respects on behalf of the committee and my colleagues to Mr. Johnston and to all the Winnipeg indigenous housing providers, who have had to struggle with COVID but also with the loss of such a strong voice. I want to make sure that you know we understand the challenges you face and the pain that you've suffered recently. I want to acknowledge that.

Mr. Damon Johnston (President, Aboriginal Council of Winnipeg): Thank you very much, Mr. Vaughan.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Vaughan.

Dr. Christensen, you have five minutes for your opening remarks.

Dr. Julia Christensen (Associate Professor and Canada Research Chair in Northern Governance and Public Policy, Memorial University, As an Individual): Good evening, and thank you, Mr. Chair and standing committee, for the opportunity to speak on such an important issue as urban, rural and northern indigenous housing.

My name is Julia Christensen, and I hold a Canada research chair in northern governance and public policy at Memorial University. I'm joining you remotely from beautiful St. John's, which is situated on the ancestral homelands of the Beothuk. It is also a city, a place of significance for Inuit, Innu and Mi'kmaq from across the province. I myself was born and raised on Chief Drygeese territory in Yellowknife, Northwest Territories.

Over the past 14 years, I have researched, collaborated and written extensively on northern housing, homelessness, rural-urban mobility and the social determinants of health. I'm also the project director for At Home in the North, a CMHC and SSHRC-funded partnership under Canada's collaborative housing research network.

Today I wish to speak with you about the persistent northern housing crisis and the ways in which it underlines the emergence of hidden and visible forms of homelessness in northern Canada. When we talk about the northern housing crisis, we are in reality talking about a chronic housing need that has persisted since the first northern housing programs were rolled out in the mid-20th century.

Northern housing, therefore, has been defined from the beginning by inadequacy and unaffordability. It's this landscape of housing need that underlies the persistence of overcrowding, couch surfing and hidden homelessness, particularly in northern hamlets and villages, and has thus pushed a significant number of family homes into acting as de facto shelters.

However, I also want to bring attention to the ways in which the northern housing crisis manifests itself in northen towns and cities. All too often, the particular housing challenges faced by northern towns and cities are overlooked because their population size and density do not look conventionally urban. However, they serve many of the same roles as cities in southern Canada, acting as administrative, economic, transportation and social and health service hubs for vast northern regions.

Since the late 1990s, visible homelessness has emerged as a significant social concern in territorial capitals as well as regional centres across the provincial north.

In my own research, intergenerational trauma related to residential school and the child welfare system is cited as a key social determinant of health that has had adverse affects on access to and sustainability of northern housing options. Moreover, point-in-time counts and other studies at the community and regional scales have illustrated that the majority of men and women experiencing homelessness in northern urban centres have moved there from outlying smaller northern communities.

Core housing need in smaller northern communities, combined with a need for resources and supports available in northern urban centres, is a key factor that frames the rural-urban movement of northerners experiencing homelessness. Therefore, any comprehensive approach to understanding northern indigenous housing needs must take into account the dynamics of housing insecurity in smaller communities as well as regional centres, and the complex interconnections between the two, which include not just access to housing but also access to key social supports and health services.

In northern towns and cities, the public sector is often the main, if not the only, provider of affordable housing, yet the demand far exceeds the supply. Moreover, the bulk of public housing units are intended for families, and therefore units for single adults are incredibly limited. The private rental market thus becomes the main source of housing for low-income single adults. However, a confluence of factors, including rents that are among the highest in Canada and the dominance of a very small number of private rental companies in northern centres, means that affordable and accessible private rental options are often out of reach.

There is tremendous resiliency, innovation and hope, however. There have been some significant developments in the areas of Housing First and transitional housing through collaborations among territorial, municipal and indigenous governments in the non-profit sector. However, these programs are not designed or funded to be long-term supportive housing options, even though many residents of these programs, as well as the housing program providers, have identified that long-term supportive housing is needed for the vast majority of program users.

Another area of significant promise is the number of community-led housing programs that have been developed and implemented under indigenous community and regional self-governments. Examples of this can be found in Nunatsiavut, as well as through the K'asho Got'ine Housing Society in Fort Good Hope, Northwest Territories. However, the resources available to communities differ widely, and there are struggles with chronic under-resourcing for effective and sustainable program delivery.

Finally, the COVID-19 pandemic has brought chronic northern housing need under a harsh new light and has made it undeniable that housing is health care. Funding has been quickly dedicated to temporarily house the homeless in emergency and overflow shelters, supportive housing and managed alcohol programs, or hotel rooms.

● (1940)

Many of these measures are temporary. There is an urgent need to support northern indigenous peoples and communities in self-determining northern housing strategies that ensure we learn from the pandemic, cultivate real and sustainable change, and do not simply return to the status quo.

Thank you. *Marsi*. *Nakurmiik*.

The Chair: Thank you, Dr. Christensen.

Mr. Johnston, you have five minutes, please.

Mr. Damon Johnston: Thank you.

Good evening, Mr. Chair and members of the committee, and a special thank you to Ms. Gazan, our MP here from Winnipeg, for giving me the opportunity to speak with you tonight.

For my part, I'm going to focus my comments primarily—and probably in total—on the urban indigenous housing experience. I've lived off reserve all my life. I'm 73 years old, and I've been involved in the community as a leader in Ontario, in British Columbia and in Manitoba.

On the housing front, I would never take the position that the need, as expressed by Dr. Christensen.... It's there. It's in the north. It's specific to first nations reserves. It's specific to Métis and to Inuit. It's also very important to the historic urban community, which really developed as indigenous charitable not-for-profit organizations in every city in Canada, and in some towns as well. Here in Winnipeg, that's been over 60 years in the making.

One of our largest housing groups here is Kinew Housing. It's a true urban indigenous housing not-for-profit. I also had a hand in Aiyawin Housing, which no longer exists. Before it left the scene, it had developed over 300 units under the old urban native housing program of the CMHC. Because of the history I have, I will say that ever since CMHC got out of that program, it's never been the same for indigenous housing off reserve. It's a shame. The population here in Winnipeg is projected to grow to 114,000 by next year's census. It's the youngest, fastest-growing population. It's a population with some of the highest need for housing anywhere.

We need innovative approaches to housing for indigenous peoples that can come from us. An example is a project that we're just starting here now for homeless persons in Winnipeg. We call it “the village”. We're going to place 24 units on our property—I am the co-chair of Thunderbird House and also the interim executive director—specifically designed to house individuals struggling with homelessness. We know that many of them have mental health or addictions issues.

This housing will be made out of containers. It will cost about $60,000 per unit. It's a very cost-effective approach. The units will be virtually indestructible. Then we're building all kinds of community supports around these individuals. We're dealing with issues of safety. We're going to have interventions for those addictions—alcohol, drugs and all those things. We're working with the Winnipeg Police Service on the safety side, and with Mama Bear Clan. This is a very holistically thought-out project that evidences the real capacity of urban indigenous citizens to come together, primarily via their urban indigenous charitable not-for-profits.

In that vein, we've brought almost 25 of these organizations into a new urban collaborative called the Winnipeg Indigenous Executive Circle, and now we are part of 32 urban coalitions in Canada. We were in Toronto last year, together as urban groups. We had the United Nations special rapporteur on housing. We were meeting to strongly encourage the federal government to work with us to develop a separate urban indigenous housing strategy.

● (1945)

It doesn't have to be either/or. The current distinctions-based and nation-to-nation process with the federal government between AFN, MNC and ITK does not enable the participation of urban voice, but urban voice, urban experience, is legitimate.

In Winnipeg, as I said, we have over 60 years of experience in developing a myriad of programs and services for indigenous individuals who have moved to cities, who continue to move to cities and who, when they get here, often fall through the cracks and end up homeless. They're coming without educational credentials. They can't get jobs. They're not accustomed to living in a city, and they quickly fall prey to many different types of predation, such as gangs and all those things.

I came back to Winnipeg in 1983 and I've been here since then, except for a two-year hiatus in Vancouver from 2005 to 2007. Winnipeg today is almost unrecognizable in terms of the growth in individuals who are struggling on the streets every day in the life of this city. I can tell you categorically that many of the newer, more innovative approaches to working with these individuals—the most marginalized, the most vulnerable—are now being led by indigenous leaders in this city.

We turned End Homelessness Winnipeg into an indigenous organization, and we have a new five-year plan, but we're working with all the non-indigenous organizations as well. Once COVID—

I'm sorry. I guess I have to stop.

Thank you very much for hearing me out.

The Chair: You're well past time, but you'll get a lot of chances to expand upon your message through the questions. I am sure of that.

We're going to start with those questions now, beginning with Mr. Kent, please, for six minutes.

Hon. Peter Kent (Thornhill, CPC): Thank you, Chair.

Welcome, Dr. Christensen and Mr. Johnston.

I'll start with you, Mr. Johnston. I'm looking at the End Homelessness Winnipeg website, and your goals are quite clear. They speak to maintaining and improving existing accommodations and acquiring private market rental rooming houses and single-room occupancy hotels.

You spoke of the Thunderbird project and this very innovative program for these very inexpensive individual units, which, I would guess, you're depending mightily on the City of Winnipeg bylaws to accommodate and to recognize as appropriate.

My first question is this: If the indigenous housing caucus's appeal for 73,000 units and $25 billion over 10 years is to be realized, what would you be looking for in the urban Winnipeg context in terms of the number of units that you actually need—and need as soon as possible?

● (1950)

Mr. Damon Johnston: Thank you.

Well, being the city with the highest per capita population of indigenous persons in the country—often Winnipeg is referred to as the largest urban reserve in Canada by many of our indigenous persons living here—we would expect, from a common-sense perspective, that there would be some level of correlation between supply and demand—in other words, between the need identified here in numbers, the waiting list for safe and affordable supportive housing in Winnipeg, and the size of the population. To me, that makes sense.

That's the first statement I'll make in that regard.

Hon. Peter Kent: What sorts of numbers are we talking about today, in terms of waiting lists, in terms of appropriate non-crowded accommodation of those who need housing?

Mr. Damon Johnston: I think the last number I saw from Manitoba Housing for people on the waiting list was around 5,500. A good percentage of those would be indigenous, because we have some of the highest need. We're working with the governments here now, municipal and provincial, to get better numbers. We need better data, in terms of the indigenous situation here in Winnipeg.

Through the WIEC collective I talked about earlier, we have a plan. In creating a community plan going forward, we want to work with the governments and other institutions to create the necessary database that will enable us to do some really comprehensive planning for that population of 114,000 I talked about earlier.

Hon. Peter Kent: In the rapid housing initiative, half a billion dollars provides for applications from, among others, non-profit organizations and indigenous governing bodies. Are you aware of this program? Are applications in the works to see whether an appropriate amount of that $500 million might be targeted to Winnipeg's indigenous housing needs?

Mr. Damon Johnston: I can update you. The City of Winnipeg was granted $12.5 million by the rapid housing initiative. They announced very recently that they've approved five projects for that total amount of money. Unfortunately, our village project didn't get consideration, because at that time we didn't have the land to build this village on. That changed just in the last couple of weeks. Now we're going to appeal directly to working with the city, and appeal back to the larger federal pot to see if there are any monies we can access that way for this project.

Hon. Peter Kent: Among your solutions, are you looking for new neighbourhood space so that you could build, rather than 10, 15, 20 or 24 units, as in the case of the Thunderbird project, perhaps several times that number over a larger urban space acquired from the city?

Mr. Damon Johnston: Yes, that's exactly right. We see this as a demonstration project, because we have 3,000 hard-core homeless persons in Winnipeg, and 70% of those are indigenous. As I said earlier, many of those individuals come to us with multiple challenges in terms of their health and addictions.

This demonstration project will be able to go ahead now if we get the rapid housing support. Thunderbird is allowing the project to be put up on a section of our property at the corner of Main Street and Higgins Avenue in Winnipeg. We have been told by the person who used to run CentreVenture, a city initiative organization, that there are minimum zoning issues with this particular site. We should be able to.... If we can find the resources, we plan to get this up and running prior to March 31, 2021.

● (1955)

Hon. Peter Kent: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Johnston.

Thank you, Mr. Kent.

Next is Ms. Young, please, for six minutes.

Ms. Kate Young (London West, Lib.): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair, and thank you to both of our witnesses today.

Dr. Christensen, I was very interested in one of your reports, which I briefly read, called *Indigenous Homelessness: Perspectives from Canada, Australia, and New Zealand*. I often think, whenever we have a problem, that we should look to other centres to see how they compare.

Could you reflect on that and give us some insight into what you found?

Dr. Julia Christensen: From the Australian context, the idea of spiritual homelessness, also known as “Koori homesickness”, was very profound for both Dr. Peters—she was the co-editor with me on that volume—and me. It was a concept we talked a lot about, as chapter contributors in that book.

It articulates the experiences of homelessness as needing to be situated within a colonial context, in the sense that dispossession, displacement and the role of intergenerational trauma, for example, really frame the social determinants of health that ultimately impact access to housing and the sustainability of housing. They also underline the need for indigenous-led and community-led housing strategies to address the very context-specific and culturally specific needs and wants that exist across indigenous communities.

As Mr. Johnston highlighted as well, when we're talking about indigenous housing, we're talking about diverse cultures and communities, not just in terms of rural versus urban, but also in the spectrum from Inuit to first nations to Métis. Within each of those groups, there are very different housing needs and priorities. We really had a lot to discuss on this, across the Canadian and Australian context in particular.

There's also a lot of innovative indigenous-led housing research that takes place in Australia and New Zealand. I would say this is something we also see in Canada. There's a need, however, for more housing researchers who are indigenous and who can have the kinds of conversations around indigenous housing priorities that are inaccessible for a settler scholar like me, which also allow for new forms of collaboration between university-based research and indigenous communities.

Ms. Kate Young: Also, as Mr. Johnston pointed out, better data is needed.

Dr. Julia Christensen: Exactly. The way housing needs are assessed currently is based on models that are typically not designed by indigenous communities. When you look across the territorial north, for example, they come from the level of the territorial government and are defined by territorial government. It becomes very difficult at the community level to articulate exactly what the needs are and where housing needs need to be prioritized.

Ms. Kate Young: I was also very interested in something that you termed “home journeying”. Can you explain that concept and how it works into our discussion tonight?

Dr. Julia Christensen: This began during my Ph.D. research, when I was looking at geographies of homelessness, in the Northwest Territories in particular. I have found, from people I was interviewing and collaborating with, who had lived experience of homelessness, that oftentimes their journeys through homelessness had actually been framed by efforts to attain or maintain a sense of home in moving from a smaller community to an urban centre, whether it was to follow children who had been apprehended by the state, for example, and placed in foster care, or whether it was to be with chosen kin, to be together with friends who were also living in shelter environments.

The significance of those connections with friends and family being very profound was something I felt was an opportunity to look at journeys through homelessness as also journeys towards home, and how those efforts to find, build and sustain home could actually be incorporated into the kinds of programs and services we offer, such as providing long-term housing support, ideally, for parents whose children are in care and providing spaces for them to be able to visit with their children.

The way the housing system is set up currently, if your children are apprehended, you are evicted from your housing, and without housing you can't regain custody of your children. It's this horrible catch-22 and cycle that parents find themselves in. Effectively, they become cut off from access to maintaining long-term meaningful connections with their children.

● (2000)

Ms. Kate Young: It really speaks to the notion of “home is where the heart is”.

Dr. Julia Christensen: Exactly. I think, too, it becomes a way for people who are experiencing homelessness to understand, to feel empowered and to see their efforts to maintain connections to family and friends as being something that should be supported through additional programming and wraparound services.

Ms. Kate Young: Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Young and Dr. Christensen.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Ms. Chabot, you have the floor for six minutes, please.

Ms. Louise Chabot: Thank you both for your testimony.

Ms. Christensen, in a very recent article, you mentioned that federal funding to address the housing crisis, particularly in the northern territories, has been in decline for two decades and will be at zero by 2037. That's a pretty disturbing finding, and at the same time, it's perhaps not all that surprising. We are talking about the northern territories.

Could you tell us more about this and what the implications of such a decline would be in the short and long term?

[*English*]

Dr. Julia Christensen: The annual funding for social housing from the federal government has been declining since the early 1990s, as you mentioned. This has been replaced by large packages of funding that are announced on a piecemeal basis. This has been incredibly challenging for northern communities because it means that it becomes very difficult to engage in any long-term planning. There is no certainty from year to year that there will be funding that can be depended on, and it makes it very difficult to see programs evolve and to be flexible and responsive to evolving needs.

What happens is that large packages of funding are announced, and they seem quite significant—millions and billions of dollars. However, in actuality, when you look at, for example, the national housing strategy and the $240 million that was dedicated to Nunavut to address chronic housing need, that actually translates into 48 new units per year under the national housing strategy. It's a drop in the bucket when you look at the number of housing units that are actually required in Nunavut.

It becomes difficult to really address the full scope of the issue. It becomes difficult to engage in long-term planning. It also means that when funding is directed through territorial governments and not directly to communities, communities have to basically respond, bend and reshape their housing needs under the priorities set at the territorial government level.

It just becomes very difficult to engage in long-term planning, ultimately, which I keep coming back to as being a tremendous challenge in addressing and really making a dent in the northern housing crisis.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Louise Chabot: Correct me if I'm wrong, but I understand from your answer that one of the solutions would be for funding to be predictable and sustainable rather than in the form of project grants or envelopes, where you don't know if the money will still be available tomorrow.

Thank you for your answer. By the way, I congratulate you for all your research and studies, it's all very instructive.

Mr. Johnston also spoke a little earlier about the lack of a cultural and historical approach in the government's homelessness policies for Canada's north, and the lack of resources for nation-specific issues.

How can we respond specifically to different nations? Can programs that are distinctive respond adequately?

● (2005)

[*English*]

Mr. Damon Johnston: Was I asked a question? I didn't get the translation.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Louise Chabot: I put the question to Ms. Christensen, but if Mr. Johnston can answer, that would be fine too.

[*English*]

Dr. Julia Christensen: Should I go first? Okay.

At Home in the North, the partnership that I direct, includes 40 community partners, largely indigenous governments across the territorial north, indigenous organizations and NGOs.

What I am hearing loud and clear from indigenous partners is the desire to see direct funding to indigenous communities, at the community level. I think that is one of the biggest obstacles to addressing these very culturally and contextually specific housing needs, and being able to develop and implement programs that can prioritize specific groups within a community.

For example, in Fort Good Hope the K'asho Got'ine Housing Society has implemented a transitional housing program for single men in their community, because they identify that as being a priority area. That was something that came through their own efforts to take back decision-making around housing program development within their community and as a part of their self-government process.

That would be greatly supported, if federal funding was directed to the community level and didn't go through the territorial government beforehand. I see that as being a significant obstacle to being able to implement these kinds of community-specific, culturally specific housing programs.

The Chair: Thank you, Dr. Christensen.

[*Translation*]

Thank you, Ms. Chabot.

[*English*]

Next we'll have Ms. Gazan, please, for six minutes.

Ms. Leah Gazan: Thank you, Chair.

I would like to thank the witnesses for being here today. My friend Damon, it's been a minute with COVID, but we work in the same community, so it's so nice to see you today. My first question is actually for you.

The Native Women's Association of Canada indicates that indigenous women living off reserve experience gender and racial discrimination by potential property owners. We know, certainly in the city of Winnipeg, that violence against indigenous women and girls has been a real crisis, and part of that, the violation of our safety, affects ability to find adequate housing.

Call to justice 4.7 of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls calls for the government "to support the establishment and long-term sustainable funding of Indigenous-led low-barrier shelters, safe spaces, transition homes, second-stage housing, and services for Indigenous women, girls and 2SLGBTQQIA people".

I was really happy to work with my colleague Adam Vaughan to secure funding, after many years, for a 24-7 safe space for women, girls, 2SLGBTQQIA people.

I was wondering if you can speak to the critical importance of low-barrier 24-7 safe spaces and housing as a life-saving measure, particularly for indigenous women, girls and 2SLGBTQQIA people. Certainly we know that Thunderbird House in my riding.... I live right by Main Street. We see the decline in mental health and the lack of spaces for people who may not be ready to give up addictions, for example. Can you speak to the importance of that as a life-saving measure in our community?

● (2010)

Mr. Damon Johnston: Absolutely.

No doubt there's a need for what you say, and it's absolutely essential that the solutions come from the women themselves and that the housing that is eventually developed meets their specific needs. Even within groups, there are differences, and those have to be addressed in any effective housing projects of that nature.

The necessary supports to enable successful interventions with any of the issues the women may be facing and the connections to the agencies need to be there. As I said before, we have 25 or more urban indigenous organizations, plus now there's a growing first nations-specific...the Eagle Urban Transition Centre, for example.

There's no shortage of knowledgeable, experienced, innovative capacity within the urban community to work with women's groups to achieve these housing goals.

Ms. Leah Gazan: Yes, I appreciate that, Damon, because I know that the families of murdered and missing indigenous women have been fighting very hard in our community to secure more low-barrier safe spaces. I appreciate your involvement in housing over the years trying to improve the situation in our community, so thank you for that.

My next question is for Dr. Christensen, with regard to intersectionalities. November was Indigenous Disability Awareness Month, and we know that indigenous people in Canada have a disability rate significantly higher than the general population and often deal with intersectional discrimination, both having a disability and being indigenous.

According to Statistics Canada, in 2017, 32% of first nations living off reserve, 30% of Métis and 19% of Inuit had one or more disabilities that limited them in their daily activities. How should this disproportionate number of indigenous persons with disabilities be considered when indigenous housing strategies are created and funded?

I say that because often the housing that is created may not necessarily be accessible or provide the support, under article 19 of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, to live in dignity. Could you speak to that specifically?

Dr. Julia Christensen: One of the challenges is that there is a complex array of needs and there is no one-size-fits-all solution that can address all of those complex needs. In terms of an indigenous housing strategy that would give significance to the experiences of indigenous people with disabilities, there are some great examples of collaborations between indigenous organizations and others in the non-profit sector that work specifically with residents with disabilities to look at housing models that can meet the specific needs of people with disabilities.

There could be a place there for increased collaboration with the non-profit sector, which is already very engaged in this area, to help inform and develop collaborative strategies in the development of indigenous housing strategies.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Gazan and Dr. Christensen.

We're going to Mr. Schmale, for five minutes.

Mr. Jamie Schmale: Thank you very much, Chair.

Thank you, witnesses, for your testimony. It's amazing stuff, so much that we've been hearing.

In similar topics, we've been hearing about the ability to really harness the decision-making in the local community. You touched on a bunch of barriers that you've been facing, and I appreciate hearing about them. We have heard similar stories from other witnesses who have appeared before our committee, so there seems to be an unfortunate common theme here.

I want to talk quickly about the path of economic reconciliation as well. I think it's a pretty important part of that. There are three areas I want to talk about that have been bandied about as potential solutions. Some of that has been already discussed in questioning here in the last 30 minutes or so, and some of it you brought up in your testimony. I'd like some feedback, if I could. I can pick one at a time, or if one person wants to comment, that's fine too.

The first is providing indigenous communities with more authority to enhance their fiscal powers—whether it is related to taxation, excise tax resources, the sale of goods; it doesn't matter—in order to build their economic capacity within their community.

The second would be something along the lines of working with indigenous-led financial institutions like the First Nations Financial Management Board, the First Nations Tax Commission or the First Nations Finance Authority to reduce some of the hurdles in the Indian Act that discourage private sector investment in indigenous communities, including many of your priorities, and lower the cost of long-term capital through policies that enhance credit ratings and provide greater security to lenders.

The third is the creation of a first nations infrastructure institute to help interested first nations build more fiscally, economically and environmentally sound infrastructure, all by better coordinating the fiscal and financing options and providing innovations for all parts of infrastructure. Basically, it's removing the part where.... Even Ms. Gazan mentioned that in her capacity as a vice-principal she had to write application after application, whereas schools off reserve would automatically get that. Maybe it's just about creating their own first nations infrastructure institute, where those projects could come at a grassroots level.

I don't know who wants to comment first or if anyone wants to comment, but I'm interested in getting feedback, if I could.

● (2015)

Mr. Damon Johnston: I'll give it a shot.

You're referencing first nations in particular. They're only one of the four places of interest that make up the indigenous community in Winnipeg and Manitoba. There are first nations, Métis, Inuit and urban.

The first nations are creating what we call urban reserves in Winnipeg. We have two of them now, and then there's another one, a bigger project about 110 acres in size. Basically, first nations can build anything on these sites, but they're still part of the reserve. They're still governed in large degree by the Indian Act and its regulations, which, as you pointed out, sometimes represent barriers to investment from private sector sources.

Going forward, we would hope that the federal government, in negotiating with first nations.... The most important thing we could do there would be to move the Indian Act out of play and create a new legislative relationship between first nations. Then we could also correct the historical imbalance of a lack of relationship with the Métis people who, if not for the Indian Act, would be members of our communities today. Again, that's evidenced because we have Métis individuals who are now acting in Manitoba to re-establish an old reserve around Duck Bay.

Many of the barriers to financing from any source other than government are in the Indian Act itself. It has to go. There are no ifs, ands or buts. It's well beyond its shelf life.

Mr. Jamie Schmale: I would agree.

● (2020)

Mr. Damon Johnston: I will finalize by saying that it would benefit all of us for that to happen, all of the four groups I told you about earlier, because we are already working together. We're making agreements or deals with each other to support different types of initiatives we want to undertake in Winnipeg. That could be even easier if the Indian Act were not in the picture.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Johnston, and thank you, Mr. Schmale.

Mr. Turnbull, you have five minutes, please.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull (Whitby, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thanks to both witnesses for being here. I'm learning a lot from you. I really appreciate your coming to the committee and giving us so much insight on such an important study.

Mr. Johnston, maybe I can ask you a couple of questions. Both of you today spoke to innovative strategies and collaboration—

[*Translation*]

Ms. Louise Chabot: Mr. Chair—

The Chair: Go ahead, Ms. Chabot.

Ms. Louise Chabot: The interpreter tells us that the MP has the wrong setting.

[*English*]

The Chair: Okay.

Mr. Turnbull, can you just check and see what channel you're on?

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: I'm on the English channel.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Is there a technical problem?

[*English*]

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: Am I not on the right setting?

The Chair: No, if you're on the English channel, you're okay.

[*Translation*]

Is it working now, Ms. Chabot?

Ms. Louise Chabot: Yes, it's working.

[*English*]

The Chair: Great.

We'll restart the clock, Mr. Turnbull. Go ahead.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: Thank you very much.

As I was saying, both of you spoke to innovative models, indigenous-led models, and I'm really interested in how social innovation may be impacting the work within Winnipeg and the indigenous executive circle.

Mr. Johnston, maybe I can start with you. You spoke to some innovative models. I'm wondering whether you can give us a sense of whether there are any other innovative indigenous-led models that you're pursuing, other than the ones you already mentioned, which were really great examples. Do you want to speak to that?

Mr. Damon Johnston: A big part of our work here in Winnipeg and the great accomplishments now of bringing these organizations together is that we're on this path under an umbrella of truth and reconciliation, recovering some our historical ways of doing things, if you know what I mean: historical governance structures and historical thinking, holistic thinking.

It has changed me. I told you earlier that I grew up off reserve, and we were the only indigenous family in this small town outside of Thunder Bay, Ontario, so I lost my language and any chance to learn my language. I lost any ability to participate in any real way in historical ceremonial practice and other cultural activities, but what I gained was an incredible understanding of non-indigenous peoples, other Canadians, and an understanding of the struggle with racism and discrimination. It began on the playground, but eventually most of us became friends, because we interacted with each other.

One of the most damaging aspects of Canadian history was our segregation on reserves and all that went with that. Any time you separate peoples from each other, you get these kinds of results. It's evidence-based. There are psychological outcomes and there are health outcomes, all kinds of negative outcomes for the individuals who experience these things.

As I grew to understand this in a much better way through a higher level of interaction with my first nations relatives on reserve and with being involved in the constitutional talks with the former prime minister Trudeau, it was an eye-opening experience, and it truly enabled me to understand why my relatives, who had grown up on reserve, were so different from me in some important ways. Then I appreciated that the education system on reserve, as we all know, was not on par with what was occurring off reserve. Much of that is the experience of the individuals today who were working so hard to try to be included in what we call Canada to enable them to get homes, what they call homes, what means home to them.

The last thing I'll say is that the unique new village we're creating is very similar to a historical indigenous village, but instead of canvas teepees or teepees made out of animal skins, the teepees in this case are made out of steel, but you still have the elements. You have the central fire and you have the teepee, a real teepee, sitting nearby. You're building in historical cultural elements that cause the individuals there to recover themselves and recover their historical way of living. They're helping each other, being able to help each other. This becomes really important when you're addressing issues like addictions to either alcohol or drugs, and the support that these individuals can give to each other.

I've seen this. I visited a mandated alcohol program in Thunder Bay, my home town, that was managed by a first nations woman. The outcomes there were quite incredible. These things, these newer types of programming to address addictions, are not yet available here in Manitoba, because, as you know, some governments struggle to appreciate these newer, evidence-based approaches to addressing these kinds of issues, and so, across Canada, we oftentimes have programs in one jurisdiction that we don't have in other jurisdictions.

● (2025)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Johnston.

Thank you, Mr. Turnbull.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Chabot, you have the floor for two and a half minutes.

Ms. Louise Chabot: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

My question, or comment, is for Mr. Johnston.

I think what you're mentioning is quite important. I'm talking about the response that you seem to have found off the reserve, particularly in Manitoba, culturally, and for communities to experience things together. It respects the realities of indigenous people, of Métis, of Inuit.

The focus of this study is on indigenous housing in urban, northern and rural areas, to identify barriers and challenges and to determine whether programs are well or poorly adapted. We have an answer to give, and the government needs to be able to tell if these programs are in line with the reality and needs you are experiencing. At the beginning of your testimony, you talked about CMHC and you said that had been a mistake. I'm not sure I understood that very well. Are the projects you are proposing promising projects that require significant support?

[*English*]

Mr. Damon Johnston: Thank you very much, Ms. Chabot.

You are right that we are seeing real evidence of better outcomes in the approaches that we're now taking here in Winnipeg, primarily because they're culturally competent; they recognize each individual, whether they're Dene, Ojibwe, Anishinabe, Ininew or Cree, Michif or Métis. You're recognizing each person for their cultural uniqueness, and then you're working with them to create programs and services that work with them. You can bring other individuals who are part of their communities into the picture to help develop these newer, innovative approaches to trying to ensure that with the investment you're making in treatment, in housing, in other supports, you're going to have a longer-lasting outcome. In fact, the person will continue to heal over the rest of their life.

● (2030)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Johnston.

We're going to finish up with Ms. Gazan.

Go ahead, please, for two and a half minutes.

Ms. Leah Gazan: Thank you so much, Chair.

My question is for Mr. Johnston.

I want to say that I really appreciated the comments you made around the dispossession of lands and how that has impacted indigenous people. I've often said that first they took away our lands, and then they left us homeless on our very own lands, so I really appreciated your comments. I've often been pretty critical of the current government but also of consecutive federal governments that have massively and systemically underfunded indigenous communities, including urban indigenous populations.

Do you believe that the violation of the indigenous right to housing is the reason why our communities—including my riding of Winnipeg Centre, where we have one of the highest urban indigenous populations in the country, and I've had many conversations with my colleague Adam Vaughan about this—are now faced with a dire crisis during COVID?

Mr. Damon Johnston: Yes, I totally agree with what you're saying.

The question for Canada is, do you want to truly include indigenous people in everything we do in this country, and are you prepared to make the necessary investments?

We've had how many years—150 years or more—of a failure to make the necessary investments. It flies in the face of any common sense. It's human beings—and that's what we are. We were never viewed that way, but we are human beings. It's human beings who create almost everything in our country, so give indigenous people a chance now to demonstrate that they can bring positive solutions to the table. We are already working with many non-indigenous organizations in this city, with some of our business leaders like Mark Chipman, the owner of the Winnipeg Jets.

Relationships are the essence of our society, and if you can't have positive relations between the different groups that make up our society, then what do you get? You get conflict.

Nobody has the answers for everything we do, but collectively, yes, we do. Just in Winnipeg, from the partnerships that we're developing with non-indigenous Canadians in many different places, with new Canadians, with refugees and through the Winnipeg partnership agreement, we know now that it's paying dividends, and it will pay even more dividends. Better outcomes will mean much less cost to our country as a whole.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Johnston.

Thank you, Ms. Gazan.

That's a positive, optimistic note to close on.

Dr. Christensen and Mr. Johnston, thank you so much for being with us. Your testimony will be extremely valuable.

Mr. Brad Vis: Chair, is there time for another quick round?

The Chair: No, we're past time as it is, Mr. Vis. I'm sorry. Mr. Vaughan feels the same way.

Thank you very much, witnesses.

Thank you very much, colleagues. We will see you again on Thursday.

Witnesses, you can tell that you've engendered much interest. They're pleading for more time, but I have to try to keep us on track here. We've reached the hour.

I would entertain a motion for adjournment, or do I have consensus to adjourn?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: Thank you, everyone.

We're adjourned.