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Chair: Mrs. Karen Vecchio



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• (1100)

[English]

The Chair (Mrs. Karen Vecchio (Elgin—Middlesex—London, CPC)): Good morning, everybody, and welcome to meeting number 102 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on the Status of Women.

Today's meeting is taking place in a hybrid format pursuant to the Standing Orders. Members are attending in person in the room and remotely using the Zoom application.

I will make a few comments for the benefit of members and witnesses. Before speaking, please wait until I recognize you by name. For those participating by video conference, make sure your microphone is unmuted before speaking, and make sure it is muted when you're not speaking. For those in the room, make sure your microphones are off; I've got this new button that can turn you all off, so you had better be careful.

Although this room is equipped with powerful audio, I just want to remind everybody to not put earpieces near the microphones, for the safety of our translators.

Today, we'll have one panel of four, and we'll be going from 11 a.m. until 12:20 p.m.

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2) and the motion adopted by the committee on Monday, November 27, 2023, the committee will resume its study on the implementation of the red dress alert.

As a reminder for you, today's format will be extended until 12:20, and then the committee will adjourn, so we're probably looking at about four rounds today.

I would now like to welcome our witnesses.

As an individual, by video conference, we have Mitch Bourbonniere.

Thank you, Mitch, for joining us.

From the Native Council of Nova Scotia, we have Lorraine Augustine, who is the president and chief.

Thank you so much for being with us in person.

From Quebec Native Women Inc., we have Marjolaine Étienne, who is the president; she, too, is appearing by video conference. Finally, by video conference, from Women of the Métis Nation, we have Melanie Omeniho.

We will begin with opening statements. I will ask you to wrap up at the five-minute mark; you might take up to an extra 10 seconds, but we try to keep our time tight.

I'm going to begin by turning it over to Mitch.

Mitch, you have five minutes.

Mr. Mitch Bourbonniere (Community Helper, As an Individual): My name is Mitch Bourbonniere, and I'm joining you from Winnipeg, Manitoba, where I live and work. I sit on the homeland of the Anishinabe, the Cree, the Oji-Cree, the Dakota, the Dene and the Red River Métis.

I am involved with the issue of missing and murdered indigenous women, girls and two-spirit people. I have volunteered for several years for a group called Drag the Red. We search the Red River in Winnipeg for evidence of missing and murdered indigenous women and girls. It is heavy work. It is emotional work. I regularly help women leaders in Winnipeg in doing land searches and in helping with vigils and other events involved with this issue. I organize and participate in seven different community walks per week, where we patrol the neighbourhoods of the inner city of Winnipeg.

I'm also involved in the issue of missing and murdered indigenous men and boys. This Father's Day will mark our seventh annual walk and honouring day for missing and murdered indigenous men and boys in Winnipeg. I run two mens' programs—one in Winnipeg, and one in Fox Lake Cree Nation. These programs are meant to help heal men and to rid our nations of toxic masculinity, and to honour women and girls as life-givers and matriarchs. I have been invited to other first nation communities to advise local men on starting their own groups.

Me and some of the men I work with are often called upon by women in the community who need protection and safety as they pack up their children and belongings to leave an abusive situation. We will sit on each side of that man as he watches his family pack up to leave. We will turn to him and say, "If you truly want to work at ever getting your family back, you need to come with us and do the hard work that it's going to take to heal yourself and rid yourself of the toxicity that was programmed into you growing up." Lots of our men were little boys who watched their mothers get terrorized. They felt helpless to protect their mothers, yet it became so normal growing up that they fell into the same behaviour as young men and men. We tap into the little boy who was horrified by the violence.

In terms of the search for missing indigenous women and girls, we consistently network with various community groups in Winnipeg, especially when particularly urgent situations of missing indigenous women arise. The groups I regularly consult with include the Bear Clan, CommUNITY204, the Sabe Peace Walkers, Anishiatie and the Downtown Community Safety Partnership.

In terms of the red dress alert, I am so thankful that there are those working to make this a reality. I hope and expect that the families of those who have lost or are missing an indigenous woman or girl will be involved and consulted with. I would also love to see a local and national command centre, with dedicated full-time paid staff around the clock, where community helpers like us can communicate with experts around this issue on an ongoing basis.

• (1105)

The Chair: Thank you so much for your testimony. We really appreciate it.

I'm going to pass it over to the Native Council of Nova Scotia. Lorraine, you have the floor for five minutes.

Chief Lorraine Augustine (President and Chief, Native Council of Nova Scotia): Thank you.

First of all, I want to thank the committee for giving me this opportunity to speak against the red dress alert system.

My name, as you know, is Lorraine Augustine. I'm the chief and president of the Native Council of Nova Scotia, which represents the off-reserve and the non-status in the province. We will be celebrating the 50th anniversary of the organization in September.

I don't have speaking notes to pass out. I don't normally speak from a speech, but I did make some notes.

One thing that concerns me with the red dress alert is who's going to administer it. When it comes to an alert like this, it really needs to be about the women. I can't stress this enough. When it comes to government policy, government legislation or anything that's going on, it always seems to be about organizations or it always seems to be about the so-called "section 35 rights holders".

If we really look at the Constitution, section 35 talks nothing about rights. It just talks about who an aboriginal person is within Canada.

I have to reiterate the fact that it's our indigenous women who need to be protected. I'm telling you that you have a long road ahead of you when it comes to developing this red dress alert.

Who's going to administer it? I believe it should be the indigenous people.

Is it going to be put off by a time frame? There have to be specific guidelines issued in order to implement this.

When it comes to the RCMP or the policing, I can almost guarantee you that a lot of the women will not call. They're afraid. Our women have been taken by policemen and murdered and raped. That's the reality.

When we're going to develop any kind of alert system, we have to really be sure who is going to be administering this. From my perspective, it needs to be the indigenous organizations. If it's going to be the policing, then they have to have indigenous women or indigenous employees to administer this.

In terms of the system you're talking about, is there going to be a time frame?

Specific guidelines need to be developed. Are we going to wait 24 hours or 48 hours? Our women could be lying in a ditch by then. We need to be very cognizant of the time and the guidelines on who and when to report on the missing and murdered.

In terms of the red dress system and the public helping our indigenous women, that's going to take some time. As a matter of fact, it's going to take a lot of time. When it comes to our indigenous women, as opposed to a non-indigenous woman who is missing or murdered.... They're right on it. When it comes to our indigenous women, sometimes they just shrug their shoulders and say, "It's just another Indian." It's going to take a lot of work in order for us to be out there.

Is the alert system going to be similar to the Amber alert? Is it going to be immediate? Who is going to be allowed to report that?

I...envy the work you're going to be doing because it's going to be a long road to get this system up and running properly.

Keep in mind that it's not about organizations. It's not about the national organizations out there or the women's.... It's our women. We need to include our women. We have to include our indigenous women and protect them.

There has to be more than just the red alert system. We have to look at prevention. The system, to start...prevention is really important as well.

• (1110)

I guess I've been given the signal, so I'll stop for now.

The Chair: Thank you so much for your powerful testimony.

I am now going to pass it over to the Quebec Native Women Inc. and Marjolaine.

Marjolaine, online, you have five minutes.

Right now I think Marjolaine has her headset off. I'm going to turn it over to Melanie for her five minutes.

Melanie, please take the floor for five minutes.

Ms. Melanie Omeniho (President, Women of the Métis Nation): Good morning.

My name is Melanie Omeniho, and I am president of Les Femmes Michif Otipemisiwak.

I'd like to acknowledge that I'm joining you today from Treaty 6 territory and the home of the motherland of the Métis Nation.

LFMO is the national indigenous women's organization that represents the voice of Métis women from across the Métis nation motherland.

We advocate nationally and internationally for equal treatment, health and well-being of all Métis people, with a focus on the rights, needs and priorities of Métis women, youth, children and 2SLGBTQIA+ persons.

LFMO envisions a wider alert system that prioritizes first and foremost indigenous women, youth and 2SLGBTQ+ persons who are at risk of going missing, experiencing gender-based violence and femicide. We can do this by centring the living experiences of the most vulnerable in our communities, because there is too much inequity and oppression within the structures that exist. They include indigenous women, girls and gender-diverse persons who are already subject to missing persons reporting and those who are likely to be subject to a red dress alert. This will ensure a more effective and timely response that is respectful of privacy and self-determination and does not further endanger people nor be weaponized against them.

In addition to operating from an indigenous-led initiative and opening space for grassroots leadership grounded in community needs, the alert must include mechanisms wherein persons who may be subject to the alert can speak back or provide feedback about the process, including what has been helpful and what has been harmful. This feedback must also be used to generate improvements to the overall system. LFMO's vision goes beyond a simple alert system and would extend to connect vulnerable people to wraparound care that is rooted in wise practices of indigenous harm reduction and trauma-informed care.

We propose a specific national body such as a red alert response centre distinct from the police, and moving beyond surface level support. The centre could help facilitate search and rescue efforts, provide ongoing support at different stages of missing persons cases, including the long-term missing, and be a direct pathway to services and supports that can increase safety and resilience amongst indigenous women, youth and 2SLGBTQIA+ persons.

LFMO's target message is that indigenous women, girls and gender-diverse persons deserve safety, protection and equity. Our emphasis would not be on conveying a specific message to the wider public, who are often very anti-indigenous, anti-poor, etc. Instead,

we believe that the red dress alert should signal to indigenous women, girls and gender-diverse people four key messages:

If you are missing, we will look for you;

When we find you, we will help you;

You will not be abandoned or ignored;

You are loved.

It's important to LFMO that the creation, implementation and evaluation of the red dress alert prioritize the needs and living experiences of indigenous women, girls and 2SLGBT persons above the general public's needs or awareness raising.

The red dress alert must be more than a simple alert system where the case is closed once a person has been located safe or deceased. It must be a tangible way in which we can increase capacity for safety, decrease harms against already hyper surveilled groups and connect those who go missing, or are at risk, to well-funded services and supports.

The overall goal must be for a red dress alert to produce quantifiable material changes in the lives of indigenous women, girls and gender-diverse persons and their families and communities. It must meet the needs and reach those who are already or likely to be impacted by MMIWG.

If a red dress alert response were created, there would also be related contact [*Technical difficulty—Editor*]

● (1115)

The Chair: I'm going to stop you for a second, because the connection froze a little bit. If you could go back about two or three sentences in your presentation so we can link it all back together, I'll give you the remaining time.

Please go ahead.

Ms. Melanie Omeniho: The overall goal must be for a red dress alert to produce actual, quantifiable material changes in the lives of indigenous women and girls, and 2SLGBT persons and their families. If a red dress alert response centre were created, there would also be related contact information and ways for the centre to be of assistance. This would be similar to the Canadian human trafficking hotline where, when a person signals the hotline, they're connected to various supports.

I'm going to end it there, but I would like to advise that LFMO also really appreciates the fact that a red dress alert may be too gender-specific and may not be inclusive enough, and we need to find a way to make sure that whatever terminology we use is inclusive of everybody.

• (1120)

The Chair: Thank you so much for your testimony. It's really well appreciated.

I'm now going to turn to the Quebec Native Women Inc., with Marjolaine, who is online.

You have the floor for five minutes.

[Translation]

Ms. Marjolaine Étienne (President, Quebec Native Women Inc.): *Kwei*, hello.

My name is Marjolaine Étienne and I am the president of Quebec Native Women Inc. In May, our organization will be celebrating its 50th anniversary. I wanted to point out that our organization has been active for 50 years, has picked itself up after setbacks, and has accomplished some great things.

Quebec Native Women is here to comment on the motion that was adopted. I believe there was a meeting in December or January and we were able to provide our comments on the implementation of a red dress alert system, which is similar to the amber alert.

We said there are certain differences that must be considered if such a system is created. In Quebec, we have to consider certain elements that could facilitate the establishment of the system. It is probably different in western Canada. There are systems in place in Quebec, but they are completely different from those in western Canada.

Our organization supports the implementation of such a system and expects that it will be implemented. We see it as one avenue among many for protecting women and young girls as much as possible, whether they are in their own community or outside it, that is, in Quebec's general population.

Implementing the red dress alert system is important. In our opinion, we need to bring together the key stakeholders who will have a role to play and will have responsibilities. I am referring in particular to the police services in the various communities in Quebec. In addition, we have to consider all the police systems outside our communities.

In order to improve safety and act quickly when someone goes missing, I think we need to establish a multidisciplinary team and take the necessary steps. In terms of implementation, though, we are talking about starting up an organization. Before all of that, however, there is preliminary work to be done. It is at that stage that we need to appeal to all the key stakeholders, including our indigenous political leaders, so they recognize that such a system would be effective. We need to take a broad overview in establishing the system and need to determine which stakeholders will have an important role to play in establishing it.

• (1125)

Just recently, we spoke briefly with the head of the Quebec Association of First Nation and Inuit Police Directors.

[English]

The Chair: Could you start winding it up because you're over the time. Please just make a last comment, please.

[Translation]

Ms. Marjolaine Étienne: Okay.

Creating the team is important, but it has to be done properly. I would call upon the key stakeholders at...

The Chair: There is no interpretation.

[English]

I don't think we have translation of that.

There was no translation even on your last couple of minutes. What I'm going to do is to ensure that when we have questions and answers, you have the opportunity to continue with your thoughts.

You had translation?

It was just me?

It shows English and I had no translation. I didn't have any translation on mine.

It's probably me, sir. You know that. You've worked with me many times.

What we are going to do is we will turn it over for the first six minutes for each person. I will pass the floor over to Anna for your lines of questions.

Anna, you have six minutes, please.

Mrs. Anna Roberts (King—Vaughan, CPC): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you to the witnesses for being here. This is a very important topic.

I have a few questions so I am going to start with Madam Lorraine Augustine.

You mentioned that the alert system has to be administered by indigenous people.

Is that correct?

Chief Lorraine Augustine: Yes, that is what I said.

Mrs. Anna Roberts: Okay.

I was just looking at some stats. As of December 31, there were 1,186 children who were successfully recovered through the Amber alert.

This is just your opinion, I understand, but do you think that by working together with all police forces across the provinces in the country, we could incorporate that into the system so that it would be widespread?

Chief Lorraine Augustine: Absolutely, I think you could. Keep in mind, though, that you need to have indigenous people administering it that rather than just the policing. I think it's really important that our indigenous women or men—it doesn't matter—administer it. The employees or whoever is administering it needs to be indigenous. I feel that we have more of a sense of what's happening within our communities and with our women, rather than looking at it as just they are reported missing. Because of the stats of how many indigenous women who have gone murdered and missing, I think it calls for that type of administration.

Mrs. Anna Roberts: My next question is for Mitch Bourbonniere.

Mitch, thank you very much for helping us better understand this.

My question is how can we, as a committee, put forward an opportunity or a plan to educate the men so that women are just as respected? I find that there's a bit of a disconnect, if you will. I know that you mentioned it and said that little boys see their moms being tortured and grow up to continue this behaviour.

How can we change that attitude?

I know we are going to have to work with women and make them stronger, but also work with young boys and men to appreciate and respect women just as much as they respect each other.

• (1130)

Mr. Mitch Bourbonniere: I'd like to clarify something. The phenomenon of missing and murdered indigenous women and girls comes from two places.

One is the trauma caused by the colonizer and the men learning to be abusive. That's one thing. As Chief Lorraine Augustine mentioned, there are non-indigenous men in power who are also responsible for the deaths, the murders and the disappearances of indigenous women. That's really important to state.

Getting back to your question, it's happening magically and organically here in Winnipeg. A women's crisis centre and women's shelter approached me and some other men in 2016. They passed tobacco. They asked us to create a healing program and a healing place for men, and actually offered up their sacred space. They invited us into their safe place to work on ourselves and to heal so that we could give back and be helpful in the community.

I work with boys. I work with young people. I work with men. That was the first men's group of its kind in Winnipeg. Now, on any day of the week there's a place for a man to go to be with other men and learn of the sacredness of women as life-givers and matriarchs.

Mrs. Anna Roberts: I have data here from Stats Canada showing that 81% of indigenous women and girls were killed by someone they knew, “including an intimate partner (35%), acquaintance (24%), or family member (22%). In most cases, the person accused of their homicide was also Indigenous (86%).”

I'm looking at these stats and thinking that we have a hell of a job ahead of us to change those numbers so that they're not so drastic. I don't know if you've read the book *If I Go Missing*. It's a really good book, and it also says that.

Are you saying that by working with young men and helping them appreciate and respect women, we can change these numbers?

Mr. Mitch Bourbonniere: Yes.

We also need to address the other 20% or 25% of people who come into indigenous communities to abuse, take, kill, rape and murder indigenous women and girls. That doesn't happen in any other communities.

The Chair: Thank you so much.

I'm now going to pass it on to Anita for the next round.

Anita Vandenberg, you have the floor for six minutes.

Ms. Anita Vandenberg (Ottawa West—Nepean, Lib.): Thank you, Madam Chair.

I want to thank all of you for your testimony and for all of the work you do.

If there's one takeaway from what each of you has said, I think it's this issue of trust: The system needs to be trusted, and that is not easy to do. That is what I'm taking away from some of your testimony.

I'd like to pick up on something I think Ms. Augustine and Ms. Omeniho both touched on, and that is the role of the public. In my mind, when we talk about a red dress alert, the idea is it should be like an Amber alert where everybody's eyes would be out there searching to multiply the chances that these women will be found. Your testimony points out, and I think rightly so, that there's racism and bias in the public, and the trust issue we talked about might also be a distrust of the general public. Then you get into privacy and issues like that.

I'd like Ms. Augustine to comment on that first, and then Ms. Omeniho. Anyone else who wants to jump in is welcome to as well.

Chief Lorraine Augustine: I think the biggest issue is awareness. A lot of the general public doesn't even know what's happening to indigenous people, let alone what's happening to our indigenous women. It's going to take a lot of education to raise awareness that this is happening.

One of your colleagues mentioned stats. If you compare the stats for indigenous women to the stats for non-indigenous women, the difference is very alarming. I think we have to let the general public know what's really happening to our indigenous women. Until we do that, a lot of the public—not all, but the majority—really won't give a hoot, I'm sorry to say, unless it happens to them, to someone in their immediate family or to someone they know. That's when they'll say, “Oh, my gosh, this is really happening out there.”

It's going to take a lot of education to make the public aware of what's happening to our indigenous women, and I think the red dress alert would be a good start.

• (1135)

Ms. Anita Vandenberg: I guess the question that I'm going to ask is: Is it possible that it can cause harm if it goes to the public—

Chief Lorraine Augustine: It can.

Ms. Anita Vandenberg: —without that kind of awareness.

Chief Lorraine Augustine: Yes, I do believe it can cause harm to some degree, yes, absolutely.

Ms. Anita Vandenberg: Thank you.

Ms. Omenihio, you used a term that is really alarming. You said that this could be "weaponized" against women. I wonder if you could weigh in on the same subject.

Ms. Melanie Omenihio: This can be weaponized. First off, I want to note that I recognize the comparison between the Amber alert system and what we're asking for with the red dress alert system. I'm going to be one of those people who doesn't believe that the Amber alert system is always the best system, because the police control who gets put forward in an Amber alert and who doesn't. The issue for us, when we're dealing with the red dress alert, is that when people's phones suddenly go off with these alert systems—and it doesn't have to just be Amber alerts—their eyeballs start rolling. They don't like the fact that they've had intrusiveness into their lives. We need to make sure that doesn't happen with the red dress alert.

The other thing is that women become vulnerable when we target them and when we're looking for them, especially if these women are hiding because they've had perpetrators abuse them. They may have gone into hiding, so we need to make sure that, if that is the case, those women—I keep saying "women", but I mean people who are vulnerable, who might be youth or 2SLGBTQ—if they are hiding, we haven't set them up to be aggressively pursued by people who have been causing them harm. There are many things within this thing that we'll have to be very careful about as it's being implemented to ensure that it really is about the safety and well-being of people.

Ms. Anita Vandenberg: Thank you.

I think that is a very alarming possibility that the committee needs to take into consideration.

Do the other two witnesses want to weigh in on this before I go to my next question?

This next question is for Mr. Bourbonniere. I was really struck by this image of you and others walking the river looking for women. It's just a horrifying thought that that's something that's even needed. Obviously, the idea behind this alert is that it will prevent that, that we don't need to have to do that anymore, that the women are not going to go missing.

Because prevention has been a theme through a lot of this testimony, I wonder if you can talk specifically, beyond the prevention of somebody in that moment of having been abducted or missing, how we go beyond that and work on prevention in general.

The Chair: You have about 30 seconds to respond.

Mr. Mitch Bourbonniere: We use a boat. We do land searches along the river, but we drag the river for two reasons, two mes-

sages. It's a message to those who are perpetrating this violence that we are out here, we are watching and we will not let you do this. The second message is to the families that we have not forgotten, that we will search for your loved ones, and we will never quit.

The Chair: Thank you so much for that.

I'm now going to pass it over to Andréanne Larouche.

Andréanne, you have six minutes.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Andréanne Larouche (Shefford, BQ): Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

To begin, I would like to thank the witnesses for being here today for our study on the implementation of the red dress alert system. You all have valuable input to provide. It is extremely interesting.

Ms. Étienne, as an MP from Quebec, let me begin with you. First, congratulations on the 50th anniversary of Quebec Native Women. That is quite a feat. Those are 50 years of hard work in defending the rights of indigenous women and girls in Quebec.

In your comments on the red dress alert, you talked about Quebec's specific characteristics. I would like to hear more about that because the plan is to create a national red dress alert. We know there are already many local initiatives in communities in Quebec and in the provinces. In view of what has already been done on the ground more locally and in addressing the communities' needs, how do you see the rollout of the alert?

• (1140)

Ms. Marjolaine Étienne: Thank you very much for the question.

What I can say right now is that the groundwork still has to be laid. Things are different at the national level. If we want to provide the best protection and inspire the greatest trust in the new red dress alert system, I think discussion tables with the key stakeholders need to be set up very soon. I am referring to public agencies and services, such as the police services in our communities. The approach must be structured and organized. Someone talked about awareness and education earlier. That is a cornerstone for getting out our messages and having them heard.

At local discussion tables, we have to think about the process for establishing the red dress alert system. We will not be reinventing the wheel. Other systems already exist; we simply have to adapt them culturally to the First Nations.

We also have to consider the speed and effectiveness of the service. The quality of service has to be better than what we have now in order to address the real needs in the situations that arise. The local table could develop a communication strategy focusing on awareness and prevention in all social strata, in our communities and in Quebec society as a whole.

In my opinion, the groundwork has to be laid in order to establish the service effectively and bring the key stakeholders into this important initiative. That will require greater awareness at the individual and collective levels on issues related to missing and murdered indigenous women.

Ms. Andr anne Larouche: You said you are in the best position to know what is being done in your communities, what the needs are, and what would be most culturally appropriate. I see a need to create a dialogue from nation to nation from the perspective of reconciliation.

All of that has to be considered or else people will still not have much trust in the system. That is what I am hearing.

Ms. Marjolaine  tienne: Precisely. We would be scratching the surface or providing a band-aid solution.

You used the right words, the key words: reconciliation, trust. We have to bring the key stakeholders to the table and work on this unifying idea that will foster individual and collective awareness. In that spirit of reconciliation, we must work quickly to address this problem plaguing indigenous women.

Yes, we are in the best position to provide input in order to address a real need involving missing and murdered indigenous women and girls.

• (1145)

Ms. Andr anne Larouche: Ms.  tienne, in addition to the police, who should be at the discussion table? How do you see that table?

Ms. Marjolaine  tienne: I see a role for an organization such as ours, Quebec Native Women, which has 50 years of knowledge and expertise in women's issues. I also see a role for the Assembly of First Nations Quebec-Labrador, which represents all chiefs, and for the police chief, who represents all First Nations police chiefs in Quebec. Equally, I think Johanne Beausoleil, the director general of the S ret  du Qu bec, could play a role.

Steps must be taken to bring the key stakeholders together around the table.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you so much.

We're now going to pass it over for the next six minutes to Leah.

Leah, you have the floor for six minutes.

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

Thank you to all of the witnesses today.

I wanted to start off with my brother Mitch. I'm going to embarrass him, because he's an adopted brother.

He's a very humble person who spends his life volunteering for our community, and literally saving lives. He has won a Governor General's Award for jumping in the Red River to save a life. I just want to honour Mitch.

Voices: Hear, hear!

Mrs. Anna Roberts: I thought he looked like you.

Ms. Leah Gazan: He's my spirit brother.

I wanted you to start by just talking about Drag the Red. I think it's important for the committee to really understand how dire it is. The process of dragging the Red came about, because women were not being looked for. Family members came out and started looking for their own relatives.

When you're dragging, what equipment are you using, and who is joining you in that boat? Be very brief, because I have so many other questions I want to ask you.

Mr. Mitch Bourbonniere: Thank you, Leah, for those kind words.

It's all led by volunteers. We go out every night between May and October. It's mostly administered and organized by women. They do the hard physical work on the boat. Some of the men and boys come to help and provide support and take direction from the women on the boat.

We literally drag the bottom of the river with hooks. We did actually find a young man a few years ago. That young man was known to me. We were able to bring him back home to his family. Many women have turned up in that river, and many more are lost to that river. That river could tell stories. It's very emotional work.

Ms. Leah Gazan: Thank you so much.

I thought that was important to share, because it speaks to the urgent need to put in place a red dress alert. We shouldn't have to search the bottom of rivers for our relatives. We are valuable and precious.

You spoke about normalized violence within our community. I want you to speak a little bit more about normalized violence outside our community.

I say that, because the last accused serial killer, who is currently on trial, was a white male. Shawn Lamb, who was accused of murdering Tina Fontaine, was another white male.

I think it's important, because often indigenous men are targeted. They say, "Well, you should look after your man." I get those comments all of the time.

Can we talk about normalized violence in the broader society against indigenous women in particular?

• (1150)

Mr. Mitch Bourbonniere: Can I respond to that?

Mr. Mitch Bourbonniere: In 1990, we created the Bear Clan Patrol. The number one reason we created that patrol as an alternative to the police was that it was obvious and visible that non-indigenous men—white men from the suburbs, affluent, in high-end vehicles with baby seats in their backseat—would come into the inner city and indigenous neighbourhoods to bother, grab up, use and abuse indigenous women and girls, who were just going about their business. That was the sole reason that Bear Clan even began 34 years ago. We said, “No, that was not going to happen in our community.”

The ultimate form of racism is to view another person as inferior and not human. If you do that, then you're allowed to do anything you want to them, and specifically to the women. If you want to harm a nation, then you harm the women of that nation. That is what has happened. There is still a 20% to 25% statistic that it's non-indigenous white men who are perpetrating this violence against indigenous women and girls.

Thank you for the opportunity for me to share that.

Ms. Leah Gazan: Yes.

Ms. Leah Gazan: Thank you so much for that.

Finally, you spoke about a local and national command centre with paid staff.

Could you expand on that for us?

Mr. Mitch Bourbonniere: Right now, it feels like we're kind of on our own. It's really grassroots. It's all done by volunteerism and networking.

Families reach out to our community—the helping community that I belong to in the inner city of Winnipeg. People don't reach out to the police. They don't reach out to first responders. They don't reach out to anybody but us for wellness checks, for domestic violence, for missing children, and for missing and murdered indigenous women and girls. They reach out to us. We feel like we're kind of on our own and we're trying to work with each other locally.

It would be so good to have a place, 24 hours a day, seven days a week, that we could call and say, “Help us, guide us, and support us. What's happening? Give us your expertise.”

Those command centres would be run by indigenous women who have lived experience in this topic.

The Chair: Thank you so much, Mitch.

I feel like I'm cutting off Leah's brother, so I have to be extra cautious on this one; we might have to discuss this after.

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

The Chair: Thank you so much for your testimony.

We're now going into our next round. It's five minutes, five minutes, two and a half, and then two and a half.

I'll pass the floor over to Dominique for five minutes.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Dominique Vien (Bellechasse—Les Etchemins—Lévis, CPC): Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

Hello and thank you to all the witnesses for your testimony.

Thank you for your concern, Mr. Bourbonniere. What you described gave us chills. I took a lot of notes. You have a vision of what your services should be. Moreover, your testimony is based on compelling experience. Thank you for your testimony this morning.

Ms. Étienne, hello and welcome to the committee.

I do not have much time so I will get straight to the point.

Your point of view is quite unusual compared to the testimony we have heard so far. I am not saying the other witnesses have been closed, but they are certainly concerned. You are open to working with police officers, police groups and police chiefs. Up until now, we have heard that including police officers in this operation could make victims more reluctant to report issues, given what indigenous communities and women have experienced with police services. Even Ms. Augustine noted that concern.

Have I understood your position correctly? You are saying the police have a role to play and must be included in the process; they have to be involved. Would you go so far as to say that it should be managed by the police, like an amber alert, or, as other stakeholders have said, do you think that indigenous women, groups and communities should manage the process?

● (1155)

Ms. Marjolaine Étienne: The disappearance of indigenous women and girls is everyone's business. I think cooperation is needed between governments, community organizations and law enforcement. We all have a role to play in addressing the problem. The indigenous community, along with existing services, must indeed be consulted. If the goal is to offer the best services possible to protect our women and young girls if they go missing, people need to mobilize around the issue. We need a seamless response process, without any cracks between the first response action and the third response action. We need continuity so the response process serves to locate the missing person quickly.

We all have to work very closely together and consult them, talk about this initiative, and get them involved early on because it really is a question of awareness. We also have to be able to develop specific criteria for the process. In my opinion, we need an approach that will create a system that can meet the real needs of indigenous women.

Mrs. Dominique Vien: Ms. Étienne, there is tremendous mistrust of police services, as you know, and you probably hear that, as we do. As to including the police, it does not look very good.

Do you also hear that from indigenous groups? That is what we have heard here at the committee.

Ms. Marjolaine Étienne: Just recently, I spoke with the police chief, the director and president of the Association of First Nation Police Directors: they are concerned as well. They too want to be able to help missing indigenous women and girls; they too are aware...

Mrs. Dominique Vien: So you think everyone wants to fix the problem.

Ms. Marjolaine Étienne: That is why I said Quebec is different; there is concern.

Mrs. Dominique Vien: Okay.

Ms. Étienne, what should the red dress alert system look like? Is the amber alert system a good example? Earlier you mentioned criteria, the general public and timelines to begin a search. How do you see it?

The chair might have to interrupt you, in which case I would ask you and your team to think about it and send us your answers in writing.

In practical terms, what is your vision of how the red dress alert would work?

I hear the timer. Please send us your answer in writing, Ms. Étienne.

Ms. Marjolaine Étienne: Okay.

Mrs. Dominique Vien: Thank you very much, Ms. Étienne. We do not have much time.

[English]

The Chair: Thanks so much.

I'm now going to pass it over to Lisa.

You have the floor for five minutes.

Ms. Lisa Hefner (Hamilton Mountain, Lib.): Thank you, Chair.

Thank you to all of our witnesses today. You've all given us a lot to think about and really valuable insight.

I would like to start with Leah's brother, Mitch Bourbonniere.

Voices: Oh, oh!

Ms. Lisa Hefner: Mitch, I have to tell you how impactful your testimony has been today. We've learned a lot from you.

I would like to go back. In your opening statement, you talked about how you help get men and boys away from these ideas of toxic masculinity. You tap into the horror of the little boy who saw his mother getting hurt until that behaviour became normalized.

I think that typically and historically in indigenous communities people did think of women as life-givers and matriarchs.

I'd like to hear more about your work and how we tap into the horror of that little boy. How do we start changing this toxic masculinity?

What can we learn from you to take to other cultures? That's what I am asking.

● (1200)

Mr. Mitch Bourbonniere: Thank you.

I am also cognizant that I don't want to take up too much air time on this panel in terms of being a male and taking up space. I am really looking forward to hearing from my other panellists as well.

Just to quickly answer the question, in Winnipeg and in Manitoba, it has been organic. It's happening. It's happening in our northern communities. I'm getting all kinds of inquiries to travel to meet with communities and to meet with the women in terms of helping the men find a vehicle for healing.

It's definitely happening in Manitoba.

Ms. Lisa Hefner: Thank you very much.

We know that in order to address gender-based violence...it's not a women's problem and it can't be just women trying to solve it. We need to bring men and boys into the conversation. Thank you for doing that work.

I want to go back to your idea about the 24-7 command centre, but maybe I'll direct my question to Madam Augustine.

This is exactly what we're trying to do on this committee. It's trying to decide exactly how this red dress alert will be rolled out, what it should look like and who should administer it.

I'd like to know more about your idea of its administration. If we had an Amber alert system.... It's run by The Weather Network—Pelmorex—right now, but The Weather Network doesn't decide who sends out the alert. It just has the platform. It's the Amber alert platform and then they can make it however they want.

Maybe it goes directly to a 24-7 command centre staffed by indigenous women and they're the ones who make the decision as to whether or not a red dress alert goes out, but it can still be on the platform that was created for the Amber alert system.

Maybe you could just talk about how you envision this working because it's exactly what we're trying to get to here.

Chief Lorraine Augustine: I envision its being 24-7, obviously. I think the administration of whatever platform we use has to ensure that it's getting out there, similar to the Amber alert. That's really important.

The command centre, as I said before, has to be run by indigenous people. It has to be 24-7, and it also has to have guidelines and be there for the family to report that. If it's not indigenous led, a lot of times our women, even our families, don't want to call and report because, if they say it's an indigenous woman, they're not going to get the reaction they want.

It does have to be a 24-7 command centre.

Ms. Lisa Hefner: Do you see this going out nationally or locally?

Chief Lorraine Augustine: It has to be national right across the board. Every single province has to be on board with it; otherwise, it's not going to work.

Ms. Lisa Hefner: The Weather Network, Pelmorex, I know can also have it set up any way we want. If it's the indigenous women's task force that decides if it goes out, they can decide if it's an intrusive alarm that wakes people up in the middle of the night. They can decide if the alarm only goes to a small area of the country.

Chief Lorraine Augustine: It should be the administrator who determines that.

The Chair: That's perfect.

Chief Lorraine Augustine: That's who I think it should be.

Ms. Lisa Hefner: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you so much.

We're now going for two and a half minutes, and I'll pass the floor over to Andréanne.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Andréanne Larouche: Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

Ms. Étienne, in the last round we talked about the make-up of a future round table and that it should be as diverse as possible and include as many concerned parties as possible.

I would also like you to talk about the continuum of services. In fighting human trafficking, certain steps have to be followed. The first is prevention and education work. Of course, we all want to do that. Then the missing or murdered indigenous women have to be identified and located, and we need the tools to do that. So considerable work has to be done to put the necessary legislation and legal tools in place in order to respond. Finally, assistance must be provided to men and women for their rehabilitation.

Aside from the diversity of the round table, what are your thoughts on the continuum of services?

• (1205)

Ms. Marjolaine Étienne: As I said earlier, it is everyone's business. By working together and raising awareness collectively, we will be able to provide a continuum of services for women from various nations.

I will not rehash past experiences, because I think we know now what indigenous women are facing, but I do think we need to review our approach to ensure that the future structure allows us to respond quickly and so we know who has to respond quickly.

I am concerned about how the structure will work at a more local level. I am referring to the nations of Quebec. Those are the first communities involved. That is where Indigenous women live. Indigenous women live in Quebec society. Implicitly, we need to involve all local stakeholders. The national system will be at a different level and will also have a role to play, but first we have to work at the local level because that is the foundation.

If we do not consult people locally, I think we could miss out on important information for establishing the red dress alert system.

The Chair: Thank you.

[*English*]

We're going to turn it over now to Leah.

Leah, you have two and a half minutes.

Ms. Leah Gazan: Thank you so much.

My first questions are for President Étienne.

Can you tell the committee what happened in Lac-Simon to women? Most of the women were from Lac-Simon. I know some were from Kitecisakik. What happened there with the police? What was discovered?

[*Translation*]

Ms. Marjolaine Étienne: Yes, in 2019, women in Abitibi reported certain situations involving police services in the Val-d'Or area. This resulted in a loss of trust in non-indigenous police services.

That is why I think we need to look at what is happening in our communities more locally. They all have indigenous police services. That is why I firmly believe a consultation process has to be launched with indigenous communities for the establishment of a service that addresses the real needs of indigenous women. That is the foundation.

[*English*]

Ms. Leah Gazan: In terms of conduct, was there reported police violence against indigenous women from these communities by the police, by the Sûreté du Québec?

[*Translation*]

Ms. Marjolaine Étienne: That was made public in 2019. It was in Abitibi, in the Val d'Or area, that women spoke out publicly about very unpleasant and troubling situations.

I raise my hat to them and salute their strength and courage in speaking out. That was also covered in a ICI RDI report, which is publicly available.

Yet these situations are not unique to Val-d'Or; they also occur...

[English]

Ms. Leah Gazan: Because I have limited time—and it's very valuable—I'm wondering how much trust there is and whether you think a solution to that would be to have first nations policing instead. Would the community feel safer? Has that been discussed?

Am I over time?

The Chair: Yes, you are, but she can answer the question.

Ms. Leah Gazan: I'm sorry.

• (1210)

[Translation]

Ms. Marjolaine Étienne: Okay.

May I answer?

[English]

The Chair: Please go ahead with your answer.

[Translation]

Ms. Marjolaine Étienne: I will be brief.

In my opinion, involving our own communities would give us insight into how things are organized and how the service is structured. Further, this would make it possible to consider all the important and relevant considerations in establishing a service that meets the needs of women and girls who might be reported missing, among other things.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you very much.

I'm usually very strict with the time, but I recognize the importance of all of these answers and all of these questions, so I'm trying to much more flexible, which, on the other hand, messes up our third round.

All we have left is time to finish the second round, which would be five minutes to Michelle and five minutes to Sonia, and then we will be finished for today. If there are any questions, work with some of your colleagues, and let's get these questions going.

Michelle, you have the floor for five minutes.

Ms. Michelle Ferreri (Peterborough—Kawartha, CPC): Thank you so much, Chair.

Thank you so much to our witnesses. This is such an important study.

Thanks to my colleague Leah Gazan for doing this study. It's really important and a big piece of all of our ridings across the country.

I want to thank Mitch.

Your testimony today is really important when we look at the prevention end of things. I have two sort of logistical questions for you.

Are you working with non-indigenous men as well, and who's funding you?

Mr. Mitch Bourbonniere: No one's funding us. We're all volunteers doing this work.

What was the second question?

Ms. Michelle Ferreri: The ratio. Do you have to be indigenous to be in the group, or does it matter?

Mr. Mitch Bourbonniere: No. Any male-identifying human can come into our group. It's the indigenous men who are seeking this help, so it's mostly indigenous men in our groups, but we certainly welcome others.

Can I quickly add something for about 20 seconds?

Ms. Michelle Ferreri: Of course.

Mr. Mitch Bourbonniere: Just getting back to the 25% or 20% of harm that's coming from outside the community, some long-distance truck drivers, some taxi drivers, some men in construction and the northern “man camps” of Manitoba Hydro have perpetrated the violence against the women. I need to remind people of that.

Really quickly, because I'm a male here, I have to honour our women in Manitoba: Leah Gazan, Hilda Anderson-Pyrz, Sandra Delaronde, Cora Morgan, Minister Bernadette Smith, our MLA, who co-founded Drag the Red, and Minister Nahanni Fontaine, who has created the Matriarch Circle.

Ms. Michelle Ferreri: Thank you.

When we look at domestic violence, which has increased drastically, and in particular for this highly targeted population of murdered and missing indigenous women and girls, there's a lot at the prevention end of things, and you touched on it very, very well today. I hope people are paying attention, because we have to break a lot of cycles where men and boys were taught very unhealthy relationships, and that just repeats. We have to do a lot of work. When we look at funding models, that's what we need to be investing in.

I'm going to turn my questions over to Ms. Augustine. I really love what you talked about today in terms of who is driving the ship to implement a red dress alert. One thing that gets lost so often—and I see this in many programs—is that everybody says that it's a great idea, but there has to be this one person or somebody who is in charge, otherwise it's like that group project in high school where we all walk away and say, “This is a great idea,” but nothing manifests as a result of it. How do you see that rolling out? Do you see it being done provincially? You have the floor here for this committee to ensure that it is actually rolled out effectively. Do you know what it looks like?

Chief Lorraine Augustine: From my perspective, I see it coming from a national perspective. They would be the main, but I think that, if we're going to do all the provinces and it's going to be national, you're going to have subs. You're going to have offices in every province and the national body as the main: That's the one person. I put that as the one person, the national office, and then each one would have an office in the provinces because you can't do all the work from a national perspective. I think the provinces have to be part of that, and be aware of what's happening in each of the provinces as well. That one person you're talking about would have to be a national body, which would be whatever you want to call it—if it's a command centre or whatever. However, that national body has to be that so-called individual person to make this work and to make it run.

● (1215)

Ms. Michelle Ferreri: Yes, the power of one often is the mover and the shaker, and I guess we should also say provinces and territories. We don't want to offend any of the territories watching.

We know about the territories. Obviously, they have a high indigenous population as well.

Chief Lorraine Augustine: Yes.

Ms. Michelle Ferreri: The biggest missing piece that I would love to see in the recommendations coming out of this study is what this concretely looks like. I really like what you've offered here today because I think you eloquently articulated that.

We had this one woman, and I keep coming back to her—I cannot remember her name, from Nova Scotia, was it Sandra—and she got it done. With boots on the ground, it got done.

Chief Lorraine Augustine: Yes, she was a champion.

Ms. Michelle Ferreri: We all know what needs to be done. I think what we need is a champion to say, “This is what we're doing and this is how we're doing it.”

Chief Lorraine Augustine: Absolutely, and that's the only way it's going to work.

The Chair: Thank you so much.

I now pass the floor over to Sonia. Sonia, you have the final round. Go ahead.

Ms. Sonia Sidhu (Brampton South, Lib.): Thank you, Madam Chair.

To all the witnesses, thank you for the work you are doing and your insightful testimony.

My first question goes to Mitch. Mitch, you talked about the heavy and emotional work, but you also talked about running two programs to heal men. Can you explain a bit about that?

Mr. Mitch Bourbonniere: Yes, so in 2016, as I stated, it was the women of the North Point Douglas Women's Centre who invited us into their sacred space. They prepared a meal for us, and it was not lost on the men the sacred gesture of, in some ways, forgiveness that the women were doing for us, giving us this safe space to heal. Through word of mouth indigenous and non-indigenous local men from the community, and now men from across the city, started to attend. We smudge, sing, share, laugh and cry. Men are taught not to say, “I love you,” not to ask for help and not to feel their feel-

ings. We do all of that. We work on ourselves to be better men, and then we take that out into the community to be helpers and warriors and support people, and we take our instruction from the women.

Ms. Sonia Sidhu: Thank you for the work you are doing.

For the red dress alert system, what role do you believe these types of organizations play in its implementation?

Mr. Mitch Bourbonniere: We're already doing the work, especially through the Bear Clan. We get alerts all the time. We also get families that just reach out to us because they know to do that, and then we mobilize and we search. To have a red dress alert—a command centre and people to help coordinate all of this for us and with us—indigenous women leading this is what we need.

Ms. Sonia Sidhu: The next question goes to Chief Lorraine Augustine. You talked about lots of education and awareness and the need to give it to the general public. What about girls and women? How you can empower them to fight the system? Also, can you talk about what guidance you would like to share in terms of ensuring some data protection and privacy within the red dress alert system? You also said it should be led by indigenous organizations.

Chief Lorraine Augustine: I'll try to answer this quickly. There are three questions in there.

The first one I'll answer is the prevention. I think we have to look at what happens when a young girl, for example, leaves the community. She goes into a city. She has nowhere to go. There has to be that preventative...a safe place for them to go to educate them on what's out there, especially if they're young, coming in for going to school. There have to be safe places for them to go, whether that's advertised on buses or whatever.

When it comes to the general public, the awareness, again that is really tough because not every person wants to know or hear about it. It's like any one of us. Sometimes things just aren't of any interest, so it's going to be really tough to try to get awareness out there that this is happening.

I'm sorry, but I missed your third question.

● (1220)

Ms. Sonia Sidhu: The other one is on data protection and privacy within the system. How can that be culturally appropriate? Can you give guidance on that?

Chief Lorraine Augustine: That's a tough question because it is going to be really difficult to do that. Do you know what? I don't think I even have an answer for that, to be quite honest. It's something that is just going to be really difficult to do, from my perspective. It's going to take some time. It's going to take some trust. I think trust is the biggest issue and education is the second biggest issue. Do they want to learn that? Do they want to build that trust?

Ms. Sonia Sidhu: Mitch, do you have any thoughts or anything to add on that?

Mr. Mitch Bourbonniere: No. I 100% support what Chief Lorraine Augustine submitted.

Ms. Sonia Sidhu: What do you think, for the red dress alert, when we are...?

Is my time over?

The Chair: It went over. Thanks so much.

I would really like to thank.... We had just an excellent panel. In coming back after our constituency weeks, we have been able to get some really excellent testimony, so I thank all four witnesses for coming and helping us get right back on track, onto this study.

Today we're going to have subcommittees, so we'll have to do a turnaround. However, I also remind everybody that, by April 12, we need your names for witnesses for the coercive control study, which will be our next study. April 12 is the deadline. We like to usually get them in by noon, but we'll give you an extension up to about four o'clock, because this is a lady who's really concerned about it. Get those in, and as a reminder, with addresses, phone numbers, whatever data you have.

Are we okay to adjourn?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: The meeting is adjourned.

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