



October 10, 2017

House Committees

Supply

Meeting topics:

Topic: Community Services

HALIFAX, TUESDAY, OCTOBER 10, 2017

COMMITTEE OF THE WHOLE ON SUPPLY

3:10 P.M.

CHAIRMAN

Mr. Chuck Porter

MR. CHAIRMAN: Order, The honourable Government House Leader.

HON. GEOFF MACLELLAN: Mr. Chairman, would you please call the Estimates for the Minister of Community Services, Resolution No. E4.

Resolution E4 - RESOLVED, that a sum not exceeding \$949,621,000 be granted to the Lieutenant Governor to defray expenses in respect of the Department of Community Services, pursuant to the Estimate, and the business plan of the Housing Nova Scotia be approved.

MR. CHAIRMAN: The honourable Minister of Community Services.

HON. KELLY REGAN: Mr. Chairman, it's my privilege and my delight to be here today to present the Estimates of the Community Services Department for the 2017-18 fiscal year.

Before I start I would like to introduce to the committee my Deputy Minister, Lynn Hartwell, and the department's Director of Budgets and Results, Peter Newbery. They are here to assist me with your questions today, as is Neil MacDonald of Housing Nova Scotia, and joining us

in the gallery is our Chief Financial Officer, Dale MacLennan, and the Executive Director of the Nova Scotia Advisory Council on the Status of Women, Stephanie MacInnis-Langley.

It's my pleasure to share our goals for the coming year, including how this year's budget will advance our ambitious agenda for change, to better support Nova Scotians in need.

I'd like to take a moment to acknowledge the work of my predecessor, Joanne Bernard. Ms. Bernard brought an unmatched passion to Community Services. It was under her leadership that government made the first significant changes to the Children and Family Services Act in 25 years. Thanks to her commitment to helping vulnerable Nova Scotians, children who come into the care of the province will have more supports and those who give of themselves to care for these children and youth will be better supported as well.

Joanne Bernard was also a strong advocate during the creation of the province's first accessibility legislation. She was a driving force in changing how we help vulnerable Nova Scotians, by improving how we provide income assistance and employment supports. I'd like to take this opportunity to thank Ms. Bernard for all her work.

Mr. Chairman, I am committed to keeping the momentum going. I think you will find this year's budget demonstrates our continued commitment to helping those who need it most.

Community Services is a department that people turn to when they face a crisis in their lives. We are a department that offers support to individuals, families, and children who are facing some of the toughest circumstances you could imagine. Oftentimes we are their lifeline and the department as a whole and our dedicated and caring staff work day in and day out to help our most vulnerable citizens.

One in five Nova Scotians seeks the help of DCS at one point or another in their lives. To give my colleagues a better idea of the work our department undertakes, let me give you some figures: at DCS we manage upwards of 11,000 referrals to Child Protection Services every year; we provide placement and case management for over 5,400 persons with disabilities; and we provide income assistance to more than 26,000 households, made up of almost 40,000 people.

Our programs are essential to the people who use them. With this budget we are investing in their future, in their families, and in their communities.

The total budget for the Department of Community Services for 2017-18 is just shy of \$950 million. That's an increase of \$20 million over the 2016-17 budget, which was almost \$930 million. Approximately 85 per cent of this budget is for payments made directly to people or to organizations providing direct services to our clients - including \$346 million for Employment Support and Income Assistance Program; \$331 million for the Disability Support Program; \$88 million for child, youth, and family supports programs; \$40 million for housing, representing the provincial contribution to programs delivered through Housing Nova Scotia; and \$8 million for programs delivered by the Advisory Council on the Status of Women.

This budget contains \$12.8 million in new investments to address core client needs in alignment with program transformation, and I'm very pleased, Mr. Chairman, that there are no reductions to programs and/or services included in this budget.

[3:15 p.m.]

The \$12.8 million in new investments this year include \$6.7 million for the Disability Support Program, known as DSP - that includes \$2.1 million to create new small options homes; \$1 million to support service providers with urgent health and safety related infrastructure repairs; \$1 million to expand day programming options for persons with disabilities; \$1 million to create a small business accessibility grant program; \$800,000 to expand the existing Community ACCESS-Ability Program; and \$750,000 to continue the progress on transformation and government's commitment to the DSP road map. This funding will go specifically toward expanding the Flex Program to allow more people to live independently in their communities.

The \$12.8 million also includes a \$2 million investment in a four-year blueprint to reduce poverty in Nova Scotia; \$1.8 million to enhance employment support services for youth; \$1.2 million to the foster care program, including rate increases for daily per diems paid to foster parents, and babysitting, as well as the implementation of automatic payments for travel and recreation to decrease the administrative burden on foster parents; and \$1.1 million to continue our efforts to reduce sexual violence.

But this budget, and this department, is not just about numbers. It's also about how these numbers and dollars will better help Nova Scotians in need. We want to improve the lives of our clients. That's why we strive for better results, better client outcomes, and to improve the way we do our work every day. It's the reason for our transformation.

As you know, Mr. Chairman, the department is undertaking a large-scale transformation, the likes of which has never happened before in Nova Scotia. From the outset, we have said that we would need to take a multi-year, multi-phased approach, seeking the advice and help of our clients and stakeholders along the way.

DCS transformation is not about a simple tweaking of our programs here and there. We're not tinkering around the edges but rather this is a fundamental rethinking and radical redesign of social services to bring about dramatic improvements in client outcomes and system sustainability. We're doing this all while continuing to provide services and meet the day-to-day needs of Nova Scotia's most vulnerable people.

I often say it's kind of like the Big Lift - we're re-decking the Macdonald Bridge, except it's Community Services. But we can't shut down Community Services on nights or weekends while we do the work; we have to continue providing services to those people who count on us while we're in the process of change.

We're now about to enter the third and final phase of transformation - the implementation and transition phase. This will last a few years because of the sheer magnitude of the work

required, but that's okay because we care more about doing it right than doing it fast. Once completed, DCS and its programs and services will look dramatically different than the way they do today.

We'll have more sustainable, predictable programs with improved and measurable client outcomes. Transformed programs will ensure the system is working as efficiently as possible and, most importantly, that programs are producing results for our clients. Our programs and services will be client-focused, administratively simple, fiscally sustainable, and innovative, leveraging technology to provide modern service delivery options.

Mr. Chairman, we have said all along that we weren't going to wait until the transformation process was over to implement all the changes to our system. If there are things we identify that would help our clients that could be implemented right away, we will do just that; in fact, we already have.

Here are some of the changes we have made already - we have implemented electronic funds transfer (EFT) for client payments, making the receipt of payment more seamless and reliable; we have reduced the risk and abuse and neglect for vulnerable children and youth through amendments to the Children and Family Services Act; we have given the option to clients of our Employment Support and Income Assistance and Disability Support Programs to receive two monthly payments instead of just one per month.

We have worked with the Federation of Foster Families of Nova Scotia to launch a mentoring program for new foster parents and an on-call peer support program for foster parents seeking advice. And we have increased the respite rate to \$56 a day to provide foster parents with the opportunity to get much-needed rest or attend to their own family medical or personal needs.

We have worked with the Department of Health and Wellness and the Nova Scotia Health Authority to design a collaborative process to better meet the complex needs for persons with disabilities. We have implemented a new interpreter service language line to be used by front-line staff with clients who have limited English proficiency. The service is available 24/7 and its available in over 200 languages.

We have reduced the administrative burden for income assistance clients by removing a portion of the caseload, about 15,000 clients, to periodic income reporting instead of monthly income reporting. Government is also changing the way Nova Scotians interact with Community Services. The department's budget includes about \$700,000 in operating and \$800,000 in capital funding to modernize the way we deliver services to Nova Scotians digitally.

The amount in this budget represents the first year of a multi-year \$7.2 million capital project. We know that more and more Nova Scotians are relying on digital technology to learn about and receive government services. So, people who use our services will have the ability to apply for support and work with their caseworkers online, reducing the need for appointments and phone calls.

We want to give people an option that will make it easier for them to work with us. We also want to increase transparency and help people learn about and understand our programs and services. Overall the number of funded staff positions, or FTEs in the department, is 27.5 lower than last year. This is mostly due to a proposed reduction of 25 FTEs over time related to DCS's transformation.

The rest is the net result of several transfers to and from other government departments. The reductions related to transformation represent a net reduction, as changes in service delivery approach and design, we know, will also require increases in some areas. These reductions will be fully achieved through attrition as the transformation process progresses, and we expect that these changes will happen over the next three to four years.

We committed early on to see where we could shift or repurpose positions and achieve efficiencies, but I stress that this will only happen where the efficiencies are actually available, and then through attrition.

To be 100 per cent clear, we are not planning any job loss but instead will look for opportunities to reinvest to improve client outcomes. Mr. Chairman, we know that Nova Scotians with disabilities want to be supported to live more independently in the community. Community Services continues to work with Nova Scotians with disabilities and their families, service providers, staff, and the community, to design and implement the future of programs and supports. We are transforming the Disability Support Program, or DSP, to become more person-directed and flexible and to allow for more individual choice. Our aim is to create a more effective system for our program participants.

Focusing on people's individual needs will help us better understand how to build the right plan for them and for their families. Consistent with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, and guided by the road map, we are transforming the Nova Scotia services to persons with disabilities program - we're moving towards smaller residential options that will allow residents to live more inclusively within their communities.

This year's budget includes more than \$2 million to open new small options homes. Small options homes allow for more independent living for DSP clients and allow them to participate more fully in their community. In 2017 so far, 39 individuals have moved to more community-based residential options. Many of them have had the opportunity to move back to their home communities, near family and friends.

Mr. Chairman, the stories are heartwarming. There was a woman about my age who lived in a larger support setting for 20 years, but she has now moved into community. There is a man with health issues who was desperately unhappy with his living situation. He was finally able to move to the community near his girlfriend, thanks to a vacancy created through the Independent Living Support program. And there was a gentleman who uses a wheelchair who waited a long time to move from an adult residential centre to a smaller setting in his home community. The arrangements made for this man actually ended up benefiting two other people as well. And a man

with challenging support needs who has lived in hospitals or specialized settings for the past 12 years is now living in the small options home and has become more involved in his community.

This new finding will help us move even more people into small options homes within communities. It's important to note that while we've stopped permanent placements in larger DSP residential facilities, we recognize that there will at times be exceptions. Our first obligation is to ensure the safety of our clients and respecting individual choice - for some people that may mean that they stay where they are until a longer-term solution is achieved.

Mr. Chairman, about one in five Nova Scotians identify as having a disability. We want to create a more inclusive and accessible Nova Scotia for them. The first step was to work with community leaders to create and pass the province's first-ever Accessibility Act. To support this legislation and to accelerate the spread of accessible spaces in buildings, our government will create a \$1 million pilot small business accessibility grant program and increase the current Community ACCESS-Ability Program by \$800,000.

Mr. Chairman, government is investing \$750,000 to support more Nova Scotians with disabilities to live independently through the Flex Program. This program gives funding to people who live independently, with support from families, or personal support networks. It gives participants more control over their own lives, while still supporting them to meet their basic needs.

In the first year of the program seven participants who were accepted on a first-come, first-served basis and others who expressed interest were put on a wait-list. This expanded program capacity will be very good news for them. Participants in this program report greater participation in the community, including the ability to work or volunteer, as well as regular physical activity and inclusion in social events. Some of the participants told us the Flex Independent Program helped remove barriers to transportation.

Community Services wants to help more Nova Scotians with disabilities find success through this program. We expect that the additional funding in this year's budget will be enough to increase the number of Flex participants from seven to about 30 people.

Mr. Chairman, every day Nova Scotians with intellectual disabilities and their families benefit from valuable day programs and employment provided by Adult Service Centres across the province. Adult Service Centres offer employment, skills training, and day programming opportunities for adults with disabilities. As part of this budget DCS is investing \$1 million to expand day program options for Nova Scotians with disabilities.

[3:30 p.m.]

Last year we invested \$790,000 to expand employment supports and social enterprise in our Adult Service Centres. We want to further expand coaching and skills development for participants. We will also continue to work with Adult Service Centres to identify and create opportunities to grow their revenues and enhance their ability to offer services to even more

people. For example, Mr. Chairman, as part of the commitment to SHIFT, we are building on a community program run by the Shelburne Association Supporting Inclusion, which runs a social enterprise hiring people with intellectual disabilities to do tasks for seniors like shovelling snow and lawn mowing.

We know that many of our program participants are having success in these programs. One example that has been brought to my attention is that of a young man who makes tie-dyed shirts and sells them at the local market. Now, thanks to day programs, he gets the support he needs to turn his creativity into a means of generating income.

Our service provider partners across the province expressed that they needed more support to continue to offer day programs effectively for Nova Scotians with disabilities. The activities they provide involve recreation and leisure, but they also involve vocational and community-based employment opportunities. In many cases, their clients want to participate in activities that will help them develop their skills. So, some of the opportunities involve transitioning to further employment while others are more suited to prepare our participants for retirement. We want Nova Scotians with disabilities, and their families, to have more choice. Our aim in expanding these options is to allow people to find the activities that best suit their personal goals. Day programs are essential to keeping people active in their communities.

Mr. Chairman, some of the homes and facilities frequented by DCS program participants urgently need repairs. We know how important it is to provide a safe and loving environment so that Nova Scotians with disabilities can be successful, and that's why this budget includes a \$1 million investment to put toward these homes and facilities that our service provider partners use so they can continue to offer safe environments for Nova Scotians to take part in a range of community and residential activities.

Our Employment Support and Income Assistance Program, some people say ECS, some people say ESIA, provides basic assistance, special needs, and Pharmacare support, all of which benefit approximately 40,000 people. It also provides employment support to about 8,000 income assistance recipients, their dependents, and youth in care of the minister, and it provides additional financial support through the Poverty Reduction Tax Credit program to almost 15,000 income assistance clients.

Young people are the future of Nova Scotia and they deserve support to reach their full potential. We believe that investing in them makes sense for our province. We want to see our youth reach their goals regardless of their background. Making investments now in our young people who are most at risk means a brighter future by supporting the training skills and education they need to break the cycle of poverty.

I am pleased that in 2017-18 our government is investing \$1.8 million to enhance Employment Support Services for youth at risk for preventive and early-intervention programming.

This budget includes funding for three employment focus programs to help young people attached to the labour force or to provide immediate supports if they do attach to ESIA. One program is the expansion of the Youth Development Initiative program or YDI. This program provides career-focused, project-based programming through organizations like Hope Blooms and it provides wage subsidies to dependents of ESIA clients and youth in care age 12 to 20. This program budget has been doubled from \$26,000 to \$52,000.

The second program is the expansion of employment supports into residential facilities for youth in care. We know that youth in care often experience low labour market attachment. Right now, residential facilities don't provide any employment supports and young people too frequently transition from child welfare to ESIA. So, we'll extend services into these facilities through programming that is client-informed through collaboration with facilities staff and the youth living in the residence.

The province is investing \$400,000 annually for this programming, which includes \$150,000 in new funding.

Finally, we're introducing the early intervention pilot. This pilot will provide a holistic, wraparound service to youth as they enter the ESIA program. The service is based on emerging best practices in addressing the barriers young people face that impacts their ability to move off of ESIA and gain financial independence. The province is investing \$1 million in this initiative.

Mr. Chairman, we know these investments will help our youth at risk build a career path that is sustainable and empowering. We also know that education is key to breaking the cycle of poverty and finding employment. We're committed to breaking down barriers and helping more vulnerable Nova Scotians continue, and complete, their education after high school.

That's why my department recently introduced the Educate to Work for dependents of the ESIA client program, to enhance preventive youth-focused supports. This program involves the early identification of at-risk youth, to support them with work experience in their field of study, post-secondary funding, and job development support upon graduation. This will help ensure that ESIA dependents are supported into independence and labour market attachment.

Recent enhancements to the Career Seek Program include funding for one year of tuition, all student fees, and all book costs, Internet access, a child care and transportation supplement, and funding to help with integration into campus life.

Throughout our transformation process, we've engaged our clients and stakeholders. We've heard from them that current income assistance rates are inadequate to cover costs for personal items, food, and shelter. We've also heard that the current way in which benefits are calculated is complex and inconsistent.

This is particularly true for the shelter benefit, which is currently calculated based on family size, and the actual cost of shelter. Cost of shelter varies from one client to another and is subject to change as a client's living situation changes. As well, under the current ESIA

regulations, clients can keep up to \$150 per month in employment income before their income assistance benefit amounts are reduced.

Employment income exceeding \$150 results in a reduction in income assistance benefits at a rate of 70 per cent. Some clients, those who experience barriers to employment and financial independence due to physical, mental, or cognitive limitations, may be eligible to participate in supported employment. Those participants can retain up to \$300 per month in employment income before their income assistance benefits are reduced, again, at a rate of 70 per cent.

Mr. Chairman, this regulation was intended to encourage clients to seek employment opportunities while continuing to receive some support from income assistance, until they're earning enough employment income that they no longer require support. However, we have heard that the 70 per cent reduction rate is too steep. Clients see their income assistance benefits as secure, reliable, monthly funding. So, I'm happy to say that this government has announced the introduction of a standard household rate, and an enhanced employment income exemption structure, with a commitment to full implementation by the Spring of 2019.

These initiatives will do several things - they'll combine the current personal and shelter allowances into one fixed-rate payment, to be called "a standard household rate." This will provide clients more predictability for their monthly payments, and will provide administrative simplicity for caseworkers. They'll also improve the adequacy of the standard household rate by 5 per cent for persons with no work obligation, and 2 per cent for all other clients.

Finally, these initiatives will implement an enhanced employment income exemption structure to help remove the current disincentive to employment. Clients will benefit more from employment income while in receipt of ESIA. This enhanced structure will also be offered to supported employment participants.

We want as many people with disabilities in Nova Scotia to be able to work as is possible, but we know that sometimes the cost for supports they need can get in the way. So enhancements to the Workplace Support Program are expanding the reach and supports available to help Nova Scotians with disabilities find and maintain employment. The technical aids and assistive devices component of the program has expanded to include post-secondary students and we've added more types of technical aids and assistive devices - and, just for folks' information, technical aids include things like modifications to office furniture, speech recognition software, and visual and graphic organizers; assistive devices may include wheelchair purchases and repairs, as well as hearing aids. With these devices and aids, Nova Scotians with disabilities are able to keep their jobs or complete their post-secondary education. I am delighted we are able to assist.

Safe and healthy children, youth, and families are key to the province's success. Research is clear that working with vulnerable and at-risk children and families in a preventive and proactive approach can help improve their living conditions and improve parents' ability to provide the best possible care for their children. Prevention and early intervention within child welfare is a proactive and early approach to strengthening children, youth, and families. It builds their resilience, ultimately mitigating the need for more intrusive, statutory interventions.

Government is committed to strengthening our child welfare prevention and early intervention efforts.

The Department of Community Services partners with and provides funding to over 100 community-based organizations. These organizations deliver prevention and early intervention programs and services to some of Nova Scotia's most vulnerable children and families across the province. We will continue working with our partners to promote safe, stable, and nurturing relationships and environments for children and families through community-based programs, services, and supports.

The Children and Family Services Act is in place to protect children from abuse and neglect. Earlier this year, the Department of Community Services implemented the first significant changes to the Act in 25 years. The changes will help protect Nova Scotians from 16 to 18 years of age, improve child safety, streamline court processes, and ensure children have a safe and lifelong family relationship. Mr. Chairman, foster parents are loving and caring people who open their hearts and homes to children in need of temporary care. We want to make sure we support the important work of those foster families - changing the Act was a huge step.

Since then, we've made some improvements to strengthen the foster care program to better serve children and youth in care. Here are a few examples. We worked with the Federation of Foster Families of Nova Scotia to launch a mentoring program for new foster parents and an on-call peer support program for foster parents seeking advice. We increased the respite rate to \$56 per day to give foster parents a chance to get much-needed rest or to attend to their own family medical or personal needs. We automated payments for baby supplies and non-prescription items to ease the administrative burden on foster parents, and we expanded after-hours supports. We understand that caring for children can be both challenging and rewarding. Foster parents give so much time and love every day to ensure vulnerable children and youth have a loving home when they need it most. We're committed to helping foster families and that's why the budget includes \$1.2 million to further enhance the foster care program.

Ask any foster parent and they'll agree that any investment in foster care is good for children and youth, but we also want to reduce the administrative burden on those foster parents. In July, we increased the per diem rate per child; we increased the babysitting rate; and we introduced a \$50 monthly automatic payment for mileage; and we're continuing to make improvements to make it easier for foster parents to be reimbursed for their expenses caring for children and youth. This year we'll be announcing a new automatic payment to help foster parents cover the cost of recreational activities for children in care. I'm looking forward to sharing the details of the automatic payment soon - and I would be remiss if I didn't take this opportunity to express my sincere appreciation to foster parents for their dedication and commitment to helping vulnerable children and youth. The fact is, we need more Nova Scotians to take on this important role.

[3:45 p.m.]

Today there are about 627 foster families providing safety, comfort and security to vulnerable Nova Scotian children who would otherwise have nowhere to turn. There are more children who need temporary homes and foster homes to provide them with a safe, loving and nurturing environment; that means more people are needed - whether it's on a full- or part-time basis to care for children who have often been through a lot of stress and strife in their young lives. Children need loving homes - and I'd say to all Nova Scotians that who you are is what these children need.

Mr. Chairman, we all deserve to live our lives as independently as possible. Each of us has a right to be full participants in society - and that means full social and economic inclusion and the opportunity to live with dignity and choice. We know there are still too many Nova Scotians living in poverty and we are committed to reducing the rate of poverty in this province. We want Nova Scotians to know that we will be working vigorously with communities, advocates, all levels of government, and people struggling to make ends meet to tackle poverty in effective, innovative ways.

It will take working together, quite frankly, with everyone to effect a real change in poverty. There is no one entity that owns this problem and there's no one entity that holds the solution. We all have a role to play in changing it.

We are working on a multi-year strategy to break down poverty in Nova Scotia. The strategy will build on the work already under way within government to better support low-income Nova Scotians and families so they can become independent, a part of their communities, and reach their full potential.

The strategy will focus on community-oriented innovation, employment and skills development, and breaking down the barriers that prevent Nova Scotians from improving their standard of living - things such as the cost of transit, communication, and education.

This is about action. We're not talking about developing a document that's going to be stuck on a shelf or that repackages things we're already doing. This is about investing in concrete new initiatives that will combat poverty. Although our strategy is a Nova Scotia initiative, it will be complementary to the federal government's commitment to the development of a federal poverty reduction strategy, as well as HRM's poverty plan. I look forward to sharing details of this work.

Housing Nova Scotia is committed to providing safe, affordable housing for low-income Nova Scotians. In this budget, we are continuing our commitment to helping seniors, persons with disabilities, and the most vulnerable Nova Scotians, access affordable housing with \$38 million in funding in partnership with the federal government. This funding will go toward creating new affordable housing units, offering more rent supplements, and investing in home repair and adaptation programs to help low-income homeowners. In addition, Housing Nova Scotia continue to invest in the capital replacement needs of our public housing stock.

Ensuring the long-term sustainability of our existing social housing stock is critical. In anticipation of the release of the National Housing Strategy later this Fall, Housing Nova Scotia is doing an internal review focused on modernizing the organization and its delivery of services, ensuring future sustainability of assets, maximizing resources and structures to best address client needs, and leveraging opportunities with other partners to deliver on housing outcomes for Nova Scotians.

We also continue to deliver on our commitment made in 2014 to invest \$42 million out of the deferred federal contribution fund. Over the last three years we've invested nearly \$27 million through the DFC to improve the condition of our social housing stock and increase access to affordable housing in the private rental market.

This budget includes \$1.3 million in provincial and federal funds for a new Down Payment Assistance Program. We know that home ownership has become more challenging and out of reach for many young Nova Scotian families. Saving for a down payment remains one of the major barriers to home ownership, which is what the one-year Down Payment Assistance Program pilot is meant to address. The program is designed to help modest-income Nova Scotians who are pre-approved for an insured mortgage from a recognized financial institution by issuing them an interest-free loan to make their down payment.

Mr. Chairman, we know that too many Nova Scotians struggle to find safe, affordable housing. Our strategic investments and partnerships with community and private partners are starting to pay off. We have reduced our wait-list by 10 per cent since March 2015, and we're working to reduce it even more in the coming months and years. Rent supplements are an effective tool to help low-income Nova Scotians find safe and affordable places to live. Now more low-income families and seniors will have access to affordable homes thanks to investments by the provincial and federal governments over the next two years. Funding for 440 new rent supplements is now available around the province and will help reduce the current wait-list for affordable housing by a further 10 per cent. Together, Housing Nova Scotia and the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation are committing \$18 million over two years under the social infrastructure fund for these new rent supplements.

I would like to speak for a moment about the work of the Advisory Council on the Status of Women. Women and girls make up 51 per cent of Nova Scotia's population, and women make up close to half of the Nova Scotia labour force; women in Nova Scotia have the highest rates of high school completion and post-secondary enrolment; and women entrepreneurs are the fastest-growing sector in new businesses. These numbers show that Nova Scotia is on the right path, but we still have a lot of work to do to bring about equality. For example, women are underrepresented in leadership, trades, science, and technology; and women experience higher rates of poverty and of violent victimization. The team at Status of Women will continue to have an important leadership role to advance equality, fairness, and dignity for all women and girls in Nova Scotia.

This month actually marks the Advisory Council's 40th Anniversary. Four decades ago, in 1977, the council held its first meeting. Nova Scotia's women have made great gains in the last 40

years, contributing to the province's prosperity and well-being. We all know that the 63rd General Assembly of the Nova Scotia Legislature includes the highest number of elected women representatives ever, with 17 MLAs, or one-third of our Legislature.

The budget for the Status of Women office focuses on services and initiatives to advance women's equality, leadership, economic security, and safety. While we know that women are the predominant victims of intimate partner violence and sexual violence, violence against women and girls affects us all. Creating a safer and more secure Nova Scotia is critical to our social and economic prosperity. Status of Women's community collaborations are essential to their work and enable the province to forge partnerships with community leaders and organizations to create opportunities for women and girls to be successful.

Status of Women invests \$8 million - about 90 per cent of their budget - to create safety and security for Nova Scotia's women and families through provision of operational funding for eight women's centres, 10 transition houses, and Alice Housing. The dedicated community leaders at women's centres, transition houses, and Alice Housing work hard to help women and children when they need it most. They are our front-line public safety partners who understand the complex dynamics of the violence women experience and provide a range of appropriate supports as women and families develop their own path forward. They not only provide immediate safety for women and children escaping domestic violence, but also contribute to a safer and more secure province.

A safer province will also come from an action plan to address domestic violence. We have started by working with existent groups that help at-risk women. We will provide funding to these community partners as they undertake new capital construction projects that will enhance supports available to women and children leaving violence. This action plan will also develop a new prevention-focused approach that will aim to disrupt the cycle of violence while ensuring that victims have the support they need to rebuild their lives.

We're also adding a second Domestic Violence Court in Halifax, in addition to the one already established in Sydney. I can tell you that I attended that court as a critic, and I am pleased to confirm that it will become permanent and that we are able to expand to another site.

The Status of Women team co-led the development of the Domestic Violence Action Plan and supported the development of the province's Sexual Violence Strategy. Status of Women is co-leading a new collaboration approach with Mount Saint Vincent University and community partners to build a prevention-focused research network for the province.

I want to commend the Advisory Council on the Status of Women for its leadership in addressing a diverse range of experiences and issues facing women across the province. Its members were part of the design team that shaped the restorative inquiry into the Nova Scotia Home for Colored Children. The Status of Women continues to host the VOICES group.

I am also extremely proud of the leadership of the Status of Women in supporting indigenous women and girls in Nova Scotia. This is important work that highlights our

commitment to reconciliation built through respectful relationships and true collaboration. As you know, Mr. Chairman, the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls was launched last year to examine underlying causes of high rates of violence against indigenous women and girls in Canada and provide recommendations to end this national tragedy.

Here in Nova Scotia, Status of Women has nurtured the development of a collaborative network of Mi'kmaq women leaders, an emerging best practice nationally, to ensure that Mi'kmaq families are kept at the centre of the national inquiry so that they can feel safe and supported throughout the process. This collaborative spirit is also demonstrated in our unique community outreach model for a Family Information Liaison Unit to provide information and support to family members and survivors. The Mi'kmaw Women Leaders Network will also host ceremonies to welcome the national inquiry to Nova Scotia when the community hearings get underway here at the end of October.

I am proud to lead this portfolio and encouraged that the province will continue supporting the work of the Advisory Council of the Status of Women. I wish them great success as they continue to strive for equality and safety for all Nova Scotian women.

Mr. Chairman, sexual violence continues to be a serious health, social, and public safety issue that affects Nova Scotians. In the three years since we began the development of Nova Scotia's first Sexual Violence Strategy, we've worked with communities to help victims and survivors of sexual violence get the support they need, and we've promoted education and awareness on the issue. I'm pleased to say that this budget continues to help address sexual violence in our province. The \$1.1 million investment will enable prevention innovation grants, public awareness and education, increased capacity of organizations that provide therapeutic counselling services for victims, targeted initiatives that focus on giving victims a choice and voice in the legal system, and targeted initiatives that focus on the prevention of and early intervention in sexual abuse and exploitation of youth and children, including human trafficking.

I want to extend my gratitude to the many committed and passionate community organizations that have supported the strategy and that work daily to improve the lives of those impacted by sexual violence. Importantly, I would like to recognize the survivors of sexual violence and their advocates, who have fought for decades to raise awareness and respond to this serious problem. To all of you, thank you for your commitment to making Nova Scotia a safer place for all.

Mr. Chairman, the Community Services budget for 2017-18 is almost \$950 million. That's an increase of \$20 million, or 2.1 per cent, over last year's budget. There are no reductions in programs or services included in this budget. It contains significant new investments and reflects the real cost of supporting existing participants in our many programs.

I look forward to discussing this budget with my colleagues across the floor. I'd like to ask the committee to ask their housing-related questions at the end, maybe, so that we can efficiently bring in our Housing Nova Scotia staff. Thank you.

[4:00 p.m.]

MR. CHAIRMAN: The honourable member for Colchester-Musquodoboit Valley.

MR. LARRY HARRISON: Mr. Chairman, that's a lot. I certainly do want to commend the department for a lot of the things that have been put in place. I just want to preface, anything that I'm going to ask is going to be based on individual concerns rather than just blanket, because they are the people who come into our offices - the ones who don't fit within the program itself.

Now, some of them are really stretching it, and others are really, really, needy when they don't fall into those particular categories. I know that the transformation has been talked about for the last number of years now, and needed to be transformed, the system, there's no question about it, and a lot of good things have happened.

I want to ask the minister: Can you just pick out one or two things where you really see the transformation that has taken place when you look back as to what it was?

MS. REGAN: I want to thank the honourable member for the question. The challenge will be winnowing it down to some of the things, but I would say one of the things that I'm most proud of, and delighted by, is the Educate to Work Program, which helps the children of ESIA recipients get an education. We have 30 young people registered in that program right now, and we felt this was important because we need to break the cycle of poverty.

If you've never had the opportunity to - if you've never known anybody who went to university, or college, and you've never had that opportunity, how are you supposed to know what to do and how to do this? The supports that we deliver through that that will enable young people to get a crack at an education, to move out of poverty, I think are significant.

Fundamentally we believe in the importance of education, in the ability of education, to lift the population out of poverty, and we believe in that, and that's why we invested in that. I would say that the changes to the Children and Family Services Act are important because, before those were implemented, when you hit 16 that was it.

Now we're able to help young people - young, vulnerable people between the ages of 16 and 18 - they have more support and they get off to a better start as they enter adulthood. I was on the Community Services Committee and we certainly heard about the need to do that when we were in Opposition, and I'm so pleased that we were able to do that.

The changes that we've been able to make to remuneration to foster families is huge. What we saw was, year over year, we had declining numbers of foster families. It's not an easy job, but we know it's where children have the best outcome - if they're in a family environment. So being able to make some changes that mean parents don't have to deal with paperwork around mileage, if they're driving around - they can get more mileage if they're driving more, but the fact that they can actually get an automatic payment there.

It's about making sure that when a baby goes into a foster home, that they don't have to file all the paperwork to have baby items provided after the fact; we can do that ahead of time. There's giving them more money for the work they do, every day. Making sure that the babysitting rate - I mean, when we announced that, I have to say parents were thrilled by that.

It doesn't mean that there aren't other things that we can do, and we are going to do more, but that babysitting rate change was a big thing, and I can't remember how many years it had been, like 20 years, since there had been a change in that rate. And I can tell you, you know, as a parent, I'm the parent of a 21-year-old, and there was a big difference in what I paid for babysitters when my 29-year-old was a baby versus my 21-year-old. We hadn't done that for 20 years, so there was a big change there. Those, I think, are some of the things that I would point to, to say have had a significant effect on various populations. If we can have more children who come into care live in foster homes versus other places of care, they tend to have better outcomes. For us, it's a good investment, I think, to make in our foster families.

MR. HARRISON: A couple of things that you mentioned. One is education. Quite a few mums have come into my office wanting to get out of their situation, and find the jobs to carry on, and they needed to go back and get some education. They've had a difficult time just getting those resources in place, so that they could do that.

That is certainly very important and, again, a lot of folks are doing that. Foster care was the other thing I wanted to pick up on, just for a moment. I want to recognize the foster parents. There are a lot of very, very, good foster parents out there, who really are concerned about the children and give them some good values to work with. However, I've also had parents come to me who had been very concerned about the environment that their children were in with foster parents.

I guess my question is, is there something in place, whereby the foster homes are monitored and just given some direction as to what they are to do?

MS. REGAN: To be clear, a foster family would have a social worker, and the children in their care would have a social worker, or the child in their care. And they're not the same people. They do check in; it is their job to make sure that the foster family is appropriate and that the children are being well-treated. There's also a program that foster parents - it's training that they have to take, it's called PRIDE, it's internationally recognized, and they have to take that training.

If you are hearing complaints, you can always contact Child Welfare, and if the honourable member is hearing complaints, that can always be looked into, and we would want it looked into if one of our colleagues was hearing complaints.

MR. HARRISON: This is just a very quick question, do those social workers, on both sides, do they get together and talk - the social worker for the parents and the social worker for the children, do they get together to look this situation as a whole and act appropriately?

MS. REGAN: Yes, they do. It is actually part of best practices. They have what they call “case conference” and they get together on a weekly basis to discuss.

MR. HARRISON: One other thing that often comes through the office is the rental rates for apartments, for houses, for whatever - is there a review done, for instance every year, to look at what the rents are in a certain area and how that affects the social assistance that a family may be getting?

MS. REGAN: The standard household rate will be looking at that particular issue. A person will have a certain rate, and if it is not adequate to their needs they can come back and we can examine that, but there is sort of a range for the province and it is static at this point.

MR. HARRISON: I am actually going to give a compliment right now. There is a lady who has a number of environmental issues and health issues and there are a lot of places she could not be and live well. She has been, for at least the time being, given an extra supplement in order for her to stay in an environment that is working for her rather than being moved to another environment which actually the department tried to do but looked at the issue and decided to leave things as they are, which I am very, very thankful for. As I said before, individual cases often don't fall in the parameters of what is set.

People are people and circumstances are always going to be different and so I am just going to ask a general question, is the flexibility there in most of the programs to actually adapt to some of the unusual circumstances that are in place?

MS. REGAN: There are two things at play here. One is to make sure there is consistency; the flip side is that we want to empower staff to be able to do what needs to be done. So as part of transformation we are absolutely looking at that, making sure there are parameters, there is flexibility within - people are people and every situation is different and so it is making sure that our staff are empowered enough to take into consideration, and so that is part of the ongoing transformation process. I have to say it is quiet exciting to be part of this.

[4:15 p.m.]

We had change-over at Labour and Advanced Education around the career centres and now, rolling out this transformation as well, I feel like we're heading down the right path. But hearing comments like yours help us to focus on that, that we need to make sure we do have the kind of flexibility for people - because, you know what? We are not all square pegs and round holes - trying to make sure that people have the maximum that we can give them in a particular case, I think is important.

MR. HARRISON: I do appreciate that, because your analogy that you used in the beginning of the Macdonald Bridge, it's getting some renovation and the end result's going to be great. But in the meantime, it gets closed and so on. I would like to think that in transformation, those individual cases are still going to be dealt with, rather than just forging head-on on what's been transformed.

One of the things - again, you're going to get it all, minister, because I'm trying to cover a lot of territory because most of the things that come into our office are Community Services, they are the issues, for a lot of them - one of the biggest complaints, and we have heard this more times than not, is the constituency communication to the recipients of the program.

Frequently, the folks will say they are not receiving phone calls, or emails, in return to their questions, or requests, or whatever, that the communication between those who are delivering the service and those who are receiving the service, there are gaps. Do you want to just respond to that?

Are there any plans in place to conduct professional development training to the caseworkers on communication - positive client services, and working with difficult clients, and working with clients with special needs?

MS. REGAN: Actually, thank you for mentioning that, because, that's actually part of rolling out the standard household rate. We have over 500 staff we have to train in advance of that, so that they are trained in that and also in dealing with clients.

I would also note that we do have a new phone line, so that people can actually get through better and get more information. We'll also have a digital strategy for DCS, so that people will be able to get information online, and get quicker services that way.

All of this is around making sure that we have improved service standards, because these are the folks that we serve, and so we need to be able to make sure that we are able to communicate well with them, and also that everyone's rowing in the same direction to improve services. Absolutely, that is part of transformation, and thank you for mentioning that, because it does sort of underline the ducks that we need to get in a row before we can roll out the standard household rate.

MR. HARRISON: I can assume then that this kind of education, communication and so on is going to be a part of any training process now for social workers who are coming out?

MS. REGAN: Right now, when social workers do come out of university, they do receive training. This will be enhanced training; it will be client-centred training that they will be getting.

MR. HARRISON: Going to the special cases again - there are some people who do not have telephones, number one - or they don't have daytime minutes in order to call a social worker; they just don't have the money.

There are also recipients who struggle from anxieties. We have a lady who comes into our office and she has so much anxiety of contacting her social worker, she can't talk on the phone. Person to person is really difficult, but she has a better chance of doing that if that communication is in place. She gets really anxious and sometimes we have to intervene for that communication because she gets so anxious.

There are just a few folks who really do fall in the transformation, kind of special areas - so what updates, if any, are being looked at to improve those kinds of communication systems?

MS. REGAN: I want to share with you that we are, in fact, exploring options to improve access to telephones, so that is one thing. It's funny because young people today, they would much rather text, I have to say, than talk on the phone - so I think a lot of young people today share your client's anxiety about actually talking on the phone.

Again, we do have the ability to have specialized people work with folks who have difficulties. For example, we have a transient unit here - not suggesting that your client is transient - in metro that deals with homeless people, and often there are a lot of mental health issues around that. They're specialized in dealing with anxiety issues and things like that - so there is an ability there.

It's always about client-centred - what can we do to make this client more comfortable? So, (a) we do have some of those already, and (b) we will be enhancing them through transformation. It is about making sure that our clients have the opportunity to work if, in fact, they are able to work - and not everyone is able to work. We want to make sure that clients have the ability to participate in their community, whatever that looks like. For some people that will be doing volunteer work for other people. It may be something completely different, but it's making sure that our clients are safe, they're provided for, and that they get to have a better life basically. So that's what we're looking for in transformation.

MR. HARRISON: I know that the system is trying to change now where those who are receiving social services, if they have any money coming in apart from that they are being cut back. I am just wondering, is there any incentive in place, or plans to be put in place to encourage able-bodied recipients to transition from assistance into employment without being penalized?

MS. REGAN: So currently right now, when someone who is receiving ESIA benefits works, the first \$150 they get to keep; after that it is clawed back at the 70 per cent rate. If they are receiving disability supports and working it is the first \$300. And what we are looking at is the possibility of changing that so that the first dollar amount will be much larger that they get to keep.

Then the rate at which it is clawed back will be much less as well. Part of this is to incent those who are able to work to work. We get it that for many people if employment has been precarious they may feel that income assistance is stable, it's predictable and all of that, and whereas they may feel employment is too much of a risk. But here they will have an opportunity to continue to collect ESIA, to get out there and get their feet underneath them so that they can they can enjoy a job, they can feel the dignity of a job and I think that allowing more people to keep more money while still maintaining their ESIA benefits that will be helpful, and that it makes sense quite frankly.

MR. HARRISON: I agree that there are some people who are very content to just be on social services and the benefits and that is okay for them, but there are others who really would like to bring in some more income for their family. I just think that they should be rewarded for that, rather than have stuff clawed back. I am just going to leave that with you.

Are there any plans to lift the moratorium on the creation of small options homes?

MS. REGAN: Sorry, I didn't catch the question. I just heard "small options homes" there.

MR. HARRISON: Are there any plans in place to lift the moratorium on the creation of small options homes?

MS. REGAN: Yes, the moratorium is lifted and we will be creating four new homes this year and four next year.

As to what we were just discussing, just to give you an idea of the possibility for folks to keep more of the money that they earn - if just 1 per cent of our income assistance recipients work more they could put \$4 million more money in their pockets. So, there is a huge opportunity there for folks if they are able to take that up.

MR. HARRISON: So, on the options homes - if someone was interested in creating a small options home, how would they go about doing that?

[4:30 p.m.]

MS. REGAN: We're actually just in the process of creating the criteria around that. We expect that folks will be able to apply to the department in the Spring to do that.

MR. HARRISON: I'm holding off the housing questions, but I'm getting to the point where I'm not going to be able to hold off too much longer. You folks could probably have the answers anyway, I'm sure.

How many affordable housing units are available now in the province?

MS. REGAN: Just for clarification, do you mean available "exist", or open?

MR. HARRISON: Both.

MS. REGAN: I'm going to read off a bunch of different numbers because we have it all sort of divided up. In terms of the number of public housing units - there are 11,560 units of which 7,740 are for seniors; 3,820 are for families; as well, we have rent supplement units and that's a further 1,532; and we have co-operative and non-profit units and that's 4,800.

MR. HARRISON: I just want to ask a couple more questions with respect to the housing. We do have a number of housing units - especially seniors - that are government run. Oftentimes

they are looking for upgrading funding to replace, let's say, windows or roofs or whatever the case may be. I've heard from a few that that is a hard thing to put in place. I don't know whether it's just a lack of interest or lack of money - maybe you could help.

MS. REGAN: I just want to share with the honourable member that, in fact, we're in the process of - we've gone through and done an assessment of most of our housing stock, exterior assessments, so we've been actually working on those exteriors.

If there is a particular one in your area that hasn't been assessed or hasn't received an upgrading and there is an issue, please contact us at Housing Nova Scotia so we know - because we haven't done them all, but we have been working on roofs and exteriors. It's an ongoing process because we have to make sure that those building envelopes are looked after. So that has been under way.

I must say that during the election I popped into the one that's closest to where I live and it had changed the exterior. I realized I hadn't been up that street for a while because the exterior had completely changed since the last time I was there which was, I thought, about a year before. There was a big change there. That is happening. I just want to point out that that happened before I became the minister. I didn't direct anybody to do that particular one.

Just so you know, in terms of assisting residents we assisted 3,380 households last year with home repair and home adaptation programs - 1,530 were preserved through major health and safety related repairs, and 1,126 seniors or persons with disabilities were helped by health and safety related repairs or home adaptations that would enable them to continue to live independently in their homes and communities. We also added 123 affordable rental units through new construction, and preserved a further 295 affordable rental units through rehabilitation and repair.

MR. HARRISON: I'm soon going to hand over the questions to my colleague. Let me just say that I really appreciate what the department is up against. It takes a lot to manage a complete province and every individual in it. I'm just going to say, I hope you never lose sight of the individual who is going to need something. Thank you very much, minister and staff.

MS. REGAN: I just want to thank the honourable member. Watching the honourable member in the House over the last four years, I know that he has never lost sight of that, and I appreciate your wise words.

MR. CHAIRMAN: The honourable member for Cumberland North.

MS. ELIZABETH SMITH-MCCROSSIN: It's nice to hear of the work that's in progress for our Community Services. I have a couple of questions.

Since I have been MLA, I have met several amazing people who are currently in a situation where they need the help of the province.

One of the situations I came across - and I was surprised - was somebody who is an entrepreneur at heart. He has started his own business and came to me out of frustration because the caseworker was recognizing his gross revenue instead of the net revenue. If he was doing some work, and he sold it for say, \$1,000, and the materials, cost of goods, was \$750, his net revenue was \$250, but his caseworker was recognizing it as \$1,000 revenue.

It just seemed a shame because here was somebody who was motivated to try to get off of the system. I'm wondering, has Community Services looked specifically at models that would help entrepreneurs to become independent and off of Community Services?

MS. REGAN: I want to thank the honourable member for her question and just say that if there is a case like that, by all means, come and talk to us. There could be something fluky going on there. For example, the caseworker might be looking at the person's bank account, and if he's running that business through that bank account they may see big dollar amounts going through, and it may be unexplained. There may be something there.

We have worked with SEED in the past around supporting entrepreneurs, et cetera. We're in the middle of transformation, and great ideas don't just come from one side of the House. I'm not ashamed to steal that kind of thing, ideas - I had to clarify there - if there are good ideas that are coming out of the Opposition, et cetera, we would like to hear them.

But, certainly we would need to investigate that further because that doesn't sound quite right.

MS. SMITH-MCCROSSIN: I agree - I didn't think it sounded right either. I did speak with a local manager and they did, in fact, tell me that there is nothing in place, that they only would recognize the net revenue, so they felt like they didn't have any tools in place to be able to help that entrepreneur.

I'm wondering if our Department of Community Services has looked at the Ontario model. I'm a big fan of trying to help people get back to work and it sounds like, from the minister's comments, she is as well. The Ontario model does allow people to earn more before they're penalized and they also are allowed to take home a higher percentage of what they're earning.

I feel, from what I've seen and the people I've met, most people would prefer not to be dependent, and would prefer to be able to take care of themselves financially. So, I think the more we can do to help promote that and help people to live independently, most people wouldn't be able to transition from being on full services to full-time work.

Also - I did bring it up with our Minister of Health and Wellness - the factor of health plans is a big deterrent for some people, going from being on assistance to a lot of lower paying jobs that don't offer a health plan. I am just wondering if you've taken a look at the Ontario model.

MS. REGAN: Any time we're looking at a new program or a new way of doing things we do a cross-jurisdictional scan; in fact, our new wage incentive is largely modelled on what is underway in Ontario. I agree with the honourable member that it's making sure that folks have the security that they can step out the door to go back to work, knowing that we're going to be there to support them as they're making that big change. The honourable member is right - it's a big change to be on ESIA and then one day to be relying on yourself only - so absolutely.

MS. SMITH-MCCROSSIN: Switching directions, I had a couple of questions around housing. Have you considered non-smoking buildings?

MS. REGAN: Our CEO is not able to be here with us today so it just may take us a little bit longer to get the housing questions, unless they're going to hold things up from the gallery - and yes, we do have some non-smoking buildings.

MS. SMITH-MCCROSSIN: I know it has been brought to my attention in our area that some people have some health challenges and have requested a non-smoking building, but they haven't been able to fulfill those requests. I wasn't sure if some buildings are specifically non-smoking, identified as non-smoking buildings or not.

I did want to, while I had a chance to speak, and then I'm going to give some time up to another member. I just want to thank you for all the work that you do and your department. We have a wonderful manager in Amherst - Andy Mills. I feel like I have to say that. He has been amazing to work with. It's a difficult job and so I do want to recognize that and thank you for that.

MS. REGAN: We're writing down Andy's name, so thank you very much. That's so nice that we were able to hear that. Our social workers have a tough job and we really appreciate the work that they do. It's not always easy, but I'm so impressed by the people within the department and the creativity, the caring - all of that. Thank you very much for passing on that name to us.

[4:45 p.m.]

MR. CHAIRMAN: The honourable member for Northside-Westmount.

MR. EDDIE ORRELL: Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and thank you, minister, for taking a few questions. I don't have a lot, but some fairly important ones, I think.

The first thing I want to ask you, in the Budget Estimates there's \$38 million in partnership with the federal government to increase access to affordable housing, including creating new affordable housing units - can you give me an indication of where those affordable housing units might be and when they would be starting construction of those?

MS. REGAN: They're actually going to be all over; wherever there is need is where we'll be building. Is there going to be one in the honourable member's riding - I can't answer that right now because we don't have our housing people down here with us, but they are going to be spread throughout the province; there is a need around the province.

MR. ORRELL: Would there be an indication of how many that might entail? If the cost of a certain building is X-million dollars, would it be 10 units, would it be 20 units? Is there any indication how many that might be and when that could start that program?

MS. REGAN: It's about \$50,000 per door to get a private developer involved in that. The cost would vary; it would depend on cost of land and various things. Obviously in HRM, land is more expensive, for example, but when you're heading outside of town it's not as expensive. It will really just depend on costs in different places, but when new ones are being built we're seeing about \$50,000 per door.

MR. ORRELL: Just continuing with that - is there going to be a greater volume or greater number of housing units built in areas of greater need or is it going to be divided equally amongst certain regions of the province? I know there is a great need in certain areas that I represent - some of them are rundown; some of them are beyond repair; and some of them are closed even. If there is going to be a greater need in a certain area, will we get a greater number of units built there according to need - not necessarily just according to geographical area?

MS. REGAN: It's difficult for me to answer that. There are definitely going to be some outside of metro. What that proportion looks like at this time I can't answer. We were asking folks to have all the housing questions at the end so we could have our Housing Nova Scotia - you may want to ask me that a little further on.

Actually, you know what? If we don't get to the answer today, we can certainly make sure that we provide that to you. Thanks.

MR. ORRELL: I'll try to stay away from the housing stuff if I can then. Sorry about that.

University funding for people who are receiving community services - I recently had, in my office, the mother of a young gentleman who was getting funding to come to university here in Halifax from down in, I think, the Ingonish area. Because he was in school all day - he had concerns with some of the funding and some of the issues with the funding, and he was trying to get his mother to do that, because he was in school and he couldn't get to the office on time.

Can you tell me exactly what a person who is on community services could receive as an educational allowance to attend university, and if there is a shortfall, how would a person go about, I don't know if it's making up the difference or if it's making sure there's enough to cover the cost, and what does it entail or is it just tuition?

MS. REGAN: So that was the Career Seek Program that he would be involved in, and it allows for tuition, books, child care, living expenses. Money to sort of help them, you know, fit in if there are events going on, Internet, that kind of thing - all of those things are covered. If they feel that they don't have enough, they should talk to their caseworker, number one. And then, in subsequent years, we do ask that they take out a student loan, et cetera. But that first year - these things are paid for.

MR. ORRELL: That's great. Because for a while we had some difficulty with getting people into community college, as the minister would know. When she was Minister of Labour and Advanced Education, we were concerned about people who could go to a private school that would be around the corner, compared to the Nova Scotia Community College that was 30 miles away, or 40 kilometres away, and the cost being more because of child care and so on.

Have we solved that problem with being able to attend the university or career college, or community college of their choice, which would be deemed to be reputable, approved by this province, not just a fly-by-the-night thing? Have we solved that problem for someone who is looking to, say, take a child care course or a hairdressing course that would be in a private college next door, compared to the community college - is that still available, and can we still look into that?

MS. REGAN: The question is, are there jobs available at the end? And if there are, and if it gives them a credential that they're going to be able to get that job, that's what we're looking for in the Educate to Work Program, right?

Just to share with the honourable member, in terms of the numbers that we've seen in that program, in 2015, it was 150, and now we're up to 192 who are enrolled this year. In the Career Seek, which is the university-stream one, we've gone from four in 2015 to fifteen, it has almost quadrupled. We are seeing the numbers expand.

MR. ORRELL: In the university, how are we getting this out? Are all caseworkers aware of this or is it something that people are - because, I personally wasn't aware that it had grown and that it was available to more people at the time. Is this something that caseworkers know about? Is it something that we should know about, that we can push someone who is receiving community services towards? How big can it grow? What will the budget allow? What can we be telling people who come for the first time?

MS. REGAN: We're not limiting the budget. When we saw that the numbers were low, we actually sent out notices to individuals, social workers, and managers. We did get the information out there. That was a couple of years ago. We're not limited in budget. We have had steady growth, but it hasn't exploded or anything like that. There's no cap on it or anything like that is what I'm trying to say.

MR. ORRELL: So that is a program that we can send people towards? Are there any limitations on what they can or can't apply for as long as they can prove there's a need or there's a job at the end? Are there any limitations on what they can or can't do? Is it limited to university? Is it limited to career colleges? Is it going to be part of the trades program?

MS. REGAN: The focus of Educate to Work is around having a credential for a job that would exist at the end. Career Seek, you can attend university for up to a maximum of six years for one degree. You can't go back and get your Ph.D. or anything like that; that's not what it is.

Educate to Work is around making sure you have a credential at the end of it that will get you something. It's not there for every program that's out there.

MR. ORRELL: Would the career counsellors at the Department of Community Services be aware of what's available in the end, or would you work with Nova Scotia Works to try and determine what is best to send or set up for or to recommend to somebody? If somebody comes in and they're dead set on doing something, and there's no job there, I understand that. But if they're just wanting to go to school because they're looking for something - you have your own in-house counsellors, I know, are they working with the new Nova Scotia Works program to try and make sure that a person is matched best with what skills they have and what's available to them at the end?

MS. REGAN: More and more we're actually working with Careers Nova Scotia - no, it's not that (Interruption) Nova Scotia Works - you would think I would remember that - so that we are aligning our information with their information so that we're working hand in hand. There's no need to reinvent the wheel, they're the experts, so that's where we seek our advice.

MR. ORRELL: I was going to ask a bunch more housing questions, so I'm going to leave it at that for now. We'll let the NDP take over, and we'll save our housing questions for the next hour.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Okay, the time is not quite expired for the PC caucus.

MR. ORRELL: We do have more.

MR. CHAIRMAN: They'll be back.

The honourable member for Dartmouth North.

[5:00 p.m.]

MS. SUSAN LEBLANC: Hello, everyone. I want to say it's nice to meet the deputy minister and - I'm sorry, I lost your role already (Interruption) budget director. I'm sorry. I have heard lots about the staff at Community Services and it is nice to finally put faces to names.

I wanted to say a special thank you to the Minister of Community Services for the invitation to myself and the PC critic, the member for Cole Harbour-Eastern Passage, for a full departmental briefing, which happened before the session began. I found it very helpful. I also wanted to give a special shout-out to the folks - the supervisors at least, because those are the ones I talked to - at the King Street office. They're very helpful and kind to us on the phone, and I'm sure you know that Dartmouth North has the highest number of users of the ESIA program in the province, so my constituency assistant and I are calling a lot.

I wanted to just start with that. Most of the people who come through our doors are having issues with income assistance. Lots of different situations, obviously; it's a huge department, as

you know. But I would say that across the board, the heart of the biggest issue is that they can't afford to make ends meet with the money that's allotted to them.

I will tell you about a woman I met on the doorstep during the election, who was living in - I would consider this the most terrifying apartment complex I visited during the election. There were plenty of scary ones. I'm sure that's the same in any constituency, but this one was particularly awful. We were knocking on doors, and this woman had a sign on her door that said, "Please knock quietly. Baby sleeping." So we did, but there was tons of noise from dogs, from all the other apartments. I couldn't imagine having a baby in that situation myself - not to judge, but that's how I felt - and she told me that that apartment cost \$750, and her allowance, because she had a baby, was \$535, if that's correct, or \$570. In any case, not nearly enough money. It was a tiny little place.

We had another woman come into our office for help, where she had been living in a particular place and was sort of living within her allotted means, in terms of her monthly allowance. But there had been a guy stabbed outside her door, and she was raising a young toddler - a single mother. She was terrified to live in this place. She didn't know when the next act of violence was going to happen. So she took it upon herself and moved to a place that was a little more family friendly - also in Dartmouth North, but much higher rent. I don't know what her first rent was, but it was somewhere in her budget. But she'd moved to a place that was \$900 per month.

Again, you can see the difference. She was figuring out how to pay that difference through budgeting her food allowance and all the other things - her baby allowance, the child tax credit - but she ran into an issue. Community Services would not pay her damage deposit because she had moved into a place that was too expensive. Even \$900 for a place to raise a child with a little bit of grass, a much safer-feeling place, for some reason she ran into an issue where her worker wouldn't pay the damage deposit. My understanding is that if you're on ESIA, it's a requirement that the damage deposit is paid for.

Another woman, who I've come to know from just hanging out at different things in Dartmouth North - at the Community Food Centre, at the library. She's everywhere with her child and is another single mom who is completely devoted to giving that kid the best possible upbringing. It makes me emotional when I talk about her, because she's so inspiring as a mom. She sat down with me, and she can't afford to make ends meet. She goes from food bank to food bank, because in the middle of the month - her child has a special skin condition where sometimes his drugs are paid for on the formula and sometimes they're not, so she doesn't know when her budget is going to be blown by those drugs.

Anyway, she goes from food bank to food bank. She's in danger of being blacklisted from the food bank system because she goes to too many. It just feels like an untenable situation. She's wanting to go to RCMP college and become an RCMP officer. She doesn't have enough money to pay for her defensive driving course to even allow her to apply for RCMP school.

I bring up all these examples to highlight the fact that there isn't enough money in the program for people to live on. My first question for you is, when transformation is complete, or even before transformation is complete, what are your plans for increases to those - you talked about the standard household rate. Can you give me an approximation even, of what those standard household rates will be. In particular, can you talk about the 5 per cent "improving the adequacy of the program" - sorry for using quotes. To improve the adequacy of the program, the 5 per cent improvement for people who can't work and the 2 per cent for people who can work.

MS. REGAN: It is difficult to discuss dollar amounts until things are all approved. Until we are ready to announce them, I am deeply uncomfortable with discussing individual case dollar amounts. We are expecting that people who do not have an expectation to work, they would see an increase of 5 per cent. As well, within their band of what they get for housing, if they were below top of that, they would move up to the top. So, there would be significant increases if they weren't at the top of their rate already, as well as the 5 per cent.

MS. LEBLANC: So, just to clarify, those people who can work or who are in the employment support part of that program, they can expect a 2 per cent increase if they are - plus if they're moving up to the top of the housing amount. So there is no way you can give an approximate - like using a test case or something, to give an average amount.

MS. REGAN: Until everything goes through the process - it is in the middle of going through Treasury and Policy Board and Cabinet and all of that - I don't want numbers floating out there. I am just not comfortable with that because I just think it is disrespectful to my colleagues to start throwing numbers around before they have been approved..

MS. LEBLANC: I just wanted to ask about the capital improvement money to move much of the system online. I am a fairly intelligent person, university educated. I have access to high-speed Internet in my home, and I did even when I'm about to tell you this story. Five years ago when I made significantly less money than I do now, when I had my first child I had to apply for EI which I was lucky to qualify for, because I had just become an employee of my own company.

I had to apply online and I have to tell you, I found that process difficult, arduous, frustrating and when I called somebody to ask questions about it, I could never get anyone on the phone. I remember thinking, while breastfeeding my daughter at 4 o'clock in the morning trying to figure this out online, thinking what do people do who don't have the supports that I do? First of all, a supportive partner, but also just people in my life who could help me with this issue. I want to register that the idea of putting these types of programs online fills me with stress and worry for people who have to access them. Given that, I want to also register that I hope there are other options.

I also think that often people who are in situations where they need to access employment services or income assistance, need people. They need a community. They're often isolated people, and they need to be able to talk to somebody in person. I would think it would be great if there was a program where workers could actually come to the people instead of the people having to call or go into an office.

Anyhow, given all of that, I would like to talk about Internet access for people on income assistance. I just have to find the question, just one second.

In September, I wrote to the minister requesting information on the government's plans for providing access to affordable Internet for residents of public housing. That's not just people on income assistance. That's particularly about residents in public housing. But the same applies for people on income assistance who aren't in public housing. I'm sure the minister would agree that access to Internet is essential to education and engagement with the labour market. It's my understanding that although there are some pilot projects in public housing complexes, many folks living in public housing don't have access to affordable Internet.

I'm wondering if the minister could explain what money, if any, is allocated in the budget for extending access to affordable Internet to residents of public housing and if there are plans to extend it to people living on income assistance in general.

MS. REGAN: First of all, to your comments around applications online, that kind of thing, that would supplement our existing system. It's not meant to replace people who provide assistance, our case workers. It's not meant to take that away or anything like that. It's just to provide people with another option.

Right now, they spend a lot of time checking receipts. We want to move away from that because we think it's counter-productive, and it doesn't really help anybody move on to their life if they're spending all this time checking receipts. We want to be able to free them up to actually do case management to help people have a better life. That was the first part.

About Internet, a lot of our clients don't even have telephones. I think before we provide free Internet, we need to look at the telephone issue. Not everyone has access to a telephone right now.

In terms of the transformation of our digital services, I just want to give you a little information about what a person would be able to do online. A person would be able to complete eligibility self-assessments, submit applications to programs and services, submit applications for special needs, and track the status of applications. As anybody who has ever ordered anything online knows, it's really nice to watch it move through the system as it makes its way to you. Folks would be able to actually track the status of their application. They would also be able to update personal information - contact information, et cetera. They would be able to receive electronic notifications regarding any changes. They would be able to view payment schedules and monthly statements. Remember, folks are now able to get paid twice a month instead of just once. They would be able to report their income each month and provide documentation for reimbursement of expenses.

It could have the advantage of making life easier for folks to be able to do that because a lot of that stuff they may not need to talk to a counsellor. But transforming from being a system that spends all its time checking your receipts, to one that actually helps people, we'll be able to

actually sit down with clients more, and help them get what they need, instead of just checking their receipts.

[5:15 p.m.]

MS. LEBLANC: I'm just going to go back to some pretty general questions now. I call them short-snappers. Can you tell me the job title and the salary of the lowest-paid employee in your department?

MS. REGAN: We don't have that level of detail here with us. It would probably be a clerk, but what they would be paid, we don't have that with us.

MS. LEBLANC: I have a couple of these. Can I just read them out to you, and then you can get the information back to us? Is that possible? So, the first one is the job title and salary of the lowest-paid employee in the department.

The second is the job title and salary of the lowest-paid employee funded through your department. To be honest, I don't know the difference there but you may understand that.

How much did the department spend on services provided by a temporary agency last year, and, how much is the department budgeting for those services in this budget?

How much did the department spend on employee overtime last year, and how much is the department budgeting for overtime this budget?

MS. REGAN: We're going to have to get back to you on all of those numbers but I'm assured Pete will write them down.

MS. LEBLANC: So, can you identify in the budget, specific budget items, or lines that include federal government transfers. For instance, on Page 6.6, there's a housing line, for the Housing Nova Scotia grant. I'm wondering if any of that money is federal funds. Can you let me know what the breakdown is between provincial and federal funds?

MS. REGAN: That represents our contribution to Housing Nova Scotia, that's not federal money. In terms of temporary employees, I know there are some departments that make use of a lot of temps. DCS does not, but we'll get you the actual numbers.

MR. CHAIRMAN: I would just remind the members to direct their comments through the Chair, s'il-vous-plaît.

The honourable member for Dartmouth North.

MS. LEBLANC: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Since the transformation began in 2014, the government has spent close to \$9 million. What funds in this budget are allocated to the transformation project for this fiscal year?

MS. REGAN: Through you, to my honourable colleague, \$2.984 million is for transformation projects, and then there's a further \$2 million for the work to reduce poverty.

MS. LEBLANC: Thank you. Can you outline what specific items will be paid for through that allocation?

MS. REGAN: Most of that money will be spent on professional services. This is a big, big project. It's not something that our staff can do off the side of their desks or anything like that while they're continuing to deliver programs to the most vulnerable Nova Scotians. This is something that we require professional services - in fact, it's been identified that the hours of work to actually have that transformation project rolled out to the end is about 3,500 days of work.

I always hate to say it's a big, big project, because there's somebody south of the border who's always talking about how big things are, but we have to make sure that there are no unintended consequences. There is simply a lot of work to get ready to be able to do this project and to get it rolled out to our clients.

MS. LEBLANC: I'm assuming that "professional services" means consultants. Is that the same? Okay.

Can you talk a little bit about that, then? Who are the consultants? Where are they based?

MS. REGAN: Our largest one is Davis Pier, which is a local firm; KPMG; CGI; Bell; Barrington Consulting; there's one called Independent Consultants; IBM; Gordon Kyle & Associates; Ernst & Young; Mara Consulting; MRA Consulting; and Infuse PR. And then there are some groups who helped us when we were going out and consulting, doing first-voice consultations and additionally doing other consultations with stakeholders - AB Captioning and CART, Society of Deaf and Hard of Hearing Nova Scotians, and Sound Systems Plus.

MS. LEBLANC: How much have personal rates in the ESIA program increased since 2014?

MS. REGAN: In 2016, the rates increased by \$20, which works out to be \$7.5 million. Sorry, in 2016, the rates increased by \$20, and that's an increase of \$7.5 million.

MS. LEBLANC: How much has the shelter allowance increased, since 2014?

MS. REGAN: There has not been an increase in the shelter allowance during that time.

MS. LEBLANC: In January 2017, at a meeting of the Standing Committee on Community Services, Deputy Minister Hartwell said that to bring everyone currently receiving income assistance to the low-income cut-off measure would cost about \$143 million. Is this investment reflected in this budget?

MS. REGAN: I think when I gave my speech, I indicated what the increase was in the budget this year, and that does not equal \$143 million. When the deputy minister was at that committee, she outlined what it would cost to bring folks up to LICO, and what the standard household rate will do. It will bring our clients closer to LICO.

If there was a basic income, that would be \$2.1 billion. Universal basic income, which is, everyone - whether they're our clients or not - it would be \$9.1 billion. Just to give you an idea of how that sort of fits in, our budget is one-tenth of that, currently. That would be a big increase. Our provincial budget is roughly \$10 billion. So, a universal basic income would almost double that.

MS. LEBLANC: On Page 6.6, again, it does appear - you've said that there are no cuts, but on Page 6.6 of the budget, it does appear that the amount budgeted for income assistance payments has decreased. I just want to clarify that that number is correct. Given that there are no cuts, why is it lower?

MS. REGAN: We actually have fewer clients. We haven't cut what we give them, but there are actually fewer clients.

MS. LEBLANC: I'm going to ask some questions about the Children and Family Services Act and that department, for a minute. Changes to the Children and Family Services Act came into effect March 1, 2017. I'm wondering if there are any funding changes related to the revised Act?

[5:30 p.m.]

MS. REGAN: I'll go back to our last question and just fill in a few more details there. The decrease in the 2016-17 actual of \$2.348 million is primarily due to lower than expected income assistance payments because of lower caseloads. There was also lower utilization of employment support services programs. These savings were in turn partially offset by increased spending in Pharmacare, higher than expected prescription drug use, so some of that money was used that way - and grant funding to Shelter Nova Scotia. I just wanted to share that with you.

In terms of the new Act, I did speak earlier today about the foster care reimbursement project and some of the changes that we're making there. There are not a lot of changes in terms of increases in funding, in part because the new investments in foster care were offset by a decline in caseload.

MS. LEBLANC: Is there funding for additional staff to address the shorter timelines in the Act?

MS. REGAN: To be clear, the caseload has continued to decline, which is not to overlook the fact that, in fact, the cases are often more complex.

One of the things that we're doing to address the shortened timelines is that we actually have a pilot under way in the western region. We actually have floaters who can go to where there

is a need if there are more cases needing to be dealt with quickly. We have floaters who can go in and assist on those. That's a pilot project, and we're looking at how that's going.

MS. LEBLANC: Is the caseload declining because the timelines are shortened? Is that a cause and effect thing? Okay. I just wanted to make sure of that.

As you know, we have done some FOIPOP work around social workers in the department. I'm wondering if you can provide right now numbers of people who are on short-term leave - social workers and front-line workers - in the department. What happens to their cases when people go on short-term leave?

MS. REGAN: We actually believe that because we're able to intervene earlier, and we will be doing more work around that, so families who may be heading for a crisis will get assistance earlier. Instead of waiting until a family is in deep trouble, if we're seeing some signs early on, if they're referred to us, we would be able to assist them earlier, and that is our plan. We're not there yet. But we have been intervening earlier.

The other thing is demographics, right? We have fewer young people, we have fewer children overall, in the province. I've often talked about a healthy population. A healthy population is supposed to be pyramid-shaped. So you have lots of kids, lots of people of working age, and then fewer seniors. In Nova Scotia, our population is upside down. We do not have a lot of kids. We have a decent number of workers, and we have lots of older people. Not that there's anything wrong with that, I always like to say that. But it does mean that we have different demographic challenges in this province.

In terms of places where we do see a significant number of cases, if someone is off, for example, on leave, we wouldn't have that level of detail here with us today. We can back-fill in the short term, if there is an issue in a particular office. We've done a review, we know that at any given time, we wouldn't have more than 10 per cent off across the system. We do have the ability to pull resources into an office, if there's an issue.

MS. LEBLANC: Part of my question around that is, the concern for the actual workers. You say you do have an ability to fill in those spots but are you taking steps to ensure that those workers don't have to go off on leave in the first place? Obviously, it's more expensive. I don't want to bring monetary measures to the reasons that they're going off on sick-leave, but in terms of, like you want to help the children before they're in a crisis situation with their families, does it not make sense to help the workers before they're in crisis as well? What steps are you taking to ensure that workers are healthy in their workplace, and happy in their workplace? And, why do you think the rates of short-term disability are going up?

MS. REGAN: Absolutely, social workers do important work. It's often difficult work. What we're seeing are more complicated cases. So, absolutely, we want to make sure that they are supported, and, in some areas, we're seeing changing demographics in terms of there's more transient folks.

In the past, where a village would have raised a child, that's not happening now. It does make things more challenging but we do make sure that the case loads that they're asked to carry are not outside of accepted norms.

MS. LEBLANC: I'm wondering if you could provide us with numbers, and again, I'm sure you don't have this at your fingertips but if you could provide us with numbers of caseloads for those workers, because, I have heard from people who work closely with those workers, that caseloads have risen from 20, in some cases from 20 to 40. It just sounds like a completely unsustainable situation. I'm wondering if you have any thoughts on that?

MS. REGAN: We monitor that monthly. We can get you that. Are you talking about - is the honourable member talking about child welfare, or all cases?

MR. CHAIRMAN: The honourable member for Dartmouth North and you can keep it casual if you like, I'm trying to keep it very easygoing here.

MS. LEBLANC: Yes, specifically, I'm talking about child protection services cases in this case.

Given that there are high amounts of people going on short-term disability and given the length of time for this process - the Act has shortened the length of time that the process takes or that people are given in terms of child protection. I'm wondering if there are protections in place for families who may be at risk of having children removed, given that workers can go out sick.

I know of examples where people have a counselling session. The counsellor goes back to the case worker to say, I have this counselling session, and finds out that the case worker is now off for six weeks, and there's no one to give that report to. If I were a parent in that situation, I would be very, very concerned about my time running out, given that the people who are supposed to be supporting my case aren't able to do it.

MS. REGAN: It's not just sick leave that creates a vacancy. There is a lot of movement in this particular area. Folks come in, they get jobs, and often, through an expression of interest, they can see there are other jobs available, and they move on to those. That's part of it.

Our concern would always be that families would be supported. We are actually having meetings around the province with managers so that we can brainstorm around that.

I do want to underline that it is not simply because we have people out on sick leave. There's a lot of movement. We have created a hiring pool which helps us fill vacancies quicker. But sometimes when you have that, the flipside of that is that people are aware of what the other opportunities are and they do move on.

We found the average caseload, so we do have that for you. Child, Youth and Family Services considers a caseload of 20 to be the standard for child protection and for children in care. Average caseloads are consistently below the standard. There are occasional spikes where a co-

worker might have just gone off, and you're picking something up, but these would be the result of staff turnover and variant demand. In the past year, the number of children in permanent care has decreased by 1 per cent, and the number of children in temporary care has increased by 9 per cent. The average caseload per staff in child protection is 10.2, for children in care is 7.6, for foster care is 16.8, and for family counselling is 19.8.

MS. LEBLANC: Thank you for those numbers. I'm wondering about the - just putting this out there - forgive me for being bold. Those people who are working on the front-lines of child protection services have a terribly difficult job. They have to go in and remove children from homes. I can't imagine having that as my job. It makes sense to me that people who enter into that workforce then fairly quickly look for other jobs that they can qualify for.

[5:45 p.m.]

I'm wondering if there are any thoughts around making those jobs more attractive so that the turnover rate is not so high. Ultimately, the people who become at risk are the families and children when there's no stability in terms of case workers. I'm wondering if you have looked at increased salaries or better benefits for those people, to somehow make the job easier - counselling services or any of those things that would help in that sort of traumatic situation.

MS. REGAN: Of course, salaries and benefits are negotiated during a collective agreement. But we have been talking with their supervisors and managers to see what things they think would make life easier for folks who are doing those really important, stressful jobs and making sure that they have the tools that they need to do those; for example, laptops. Maybe that makes their job easier than having to go back and file all your reports at a desk, for example.

They would have access to counselling through our EAPs, employee assistance programs, that are available to all government employees. They're members of a professional body, so they would also have access to things there too.

We are working with the managers. I don't want us at head office telling them, here's more stuff. We're trying to find out from managers what would make these very crucial, high-stress jobs - what tools can we give our workers to make their jobs easier.

MS. LEBLANC: In terms of people living in low-income situations - there are high amounts of stress for people in low-income situations. They don't have time for counselling because they're working three jobs. They don't have access to counselling or money for counselling in many cases. They're worried about a lot of different things and therefore are more susceptible to being part of the child protection services program.

I know that these issues are way more amplified for racialized communities. In light of this, I'm wondering if you have given thought to programs for ESIA clients or people in low-income situations, or increased funding for organizations that support people in this situation so that we can avoid them entering the system in the first place.

I'm also wondering - part b - if you have the numbers of people in the system broken down by race. If you have those numbers, would you be willing to share them?

MS. REGAN: I'm going to try and make sure I address all of the questions. We fund a whole number of organizations that provide this kind of counselling and assistance to our clients. Family resource centres, family services counselling; if they're getting ESIA, they can get psychological supports as well.

I would note that a lot of the community health organizations around the province offer free courses on mental health, and things like that. I know the one in my own riding, the Cobequid Community Health Centre, they do all kinds of different programming for a variety of mental health and other courses. There's a lot of that going on. Sometimes it's just knowing about it, so as an MLA I'm always putting that information out there.

When there are courses coming up, I'm always trying to share that with the community, so that folks know that there are free courses that they can take, that will do that. In terms of breakdowns by race, we would have numbers for Aboriginal persons, but we would not necessarily have for African Nova Scotians, because they would have to self-identify, and if someone is bi-racial, they may not identify that way. We could give you ballpark-ish, but they would not be necessarily accurate.

MS. LEBLANC: In the 2015-16 budget, there were cuts made to the grants for a number of organizations. Then in this budget, the 2016-17, there has been no additional reductions. Some grants were reinstated, and some planned reductions were cancelled. For example, there was a plan to eliminate the funding for Feed Nova Scotia, but then that was changed at the last minute. My question is, are there any changes to discretionary grants for community organizations in this budget, and, if so, can you please provide us a list of which organizations would be affected, and the amounts that their grants will change?

MS. REGAN: I'm informed there are no cuts to any organizations.

MS. LEBLANC: Just before I go on with my next question, I want to flag for you that I do have a ton of housing questions, and so obviously we're running out of time now, and I don't think we'll get back to me, tonight. Will there be someone from Housing here tomorrow to answer questions? You can answer that later. Anyway, I just want to flag it.

Moving on to the Disability Support Program. Within that program, there has been government commitment to move towards community-based service models, and reduce reliance on large-scale facilities. What funds are allocated in the budget to increase community residential capacity, i.e, small options homes? I think you answered this already, but I didn't hear the answer, and how does it compare to previous years?

MS. REGAN: We have a \$2.1 million investment to create new small options homes, and there's an additional \$2.1 million again next year. There is also a \$750,000 investment in the Flex independent program to expand the current pilot by another 25 clients.

MS. LEBLANC: Based on our recent information, there are 1,143 people on the wait-list for the Disability Support Program. What funding is allocated in the budget to ensure folks on the wait-list will be able to access the supports they need? What impact do you expect that funding to have on the wait-list?

MS. REGAN: What we do know is that when people begin moving out into the community, it often frees up other space along the way. I spoke about that in my speech where a gentleman had moved into a different living arrangement, and that actually freed up more space for other people. What we're starting to see is that, as people move out along the continuum, and they're requiring less support in some cases, you're seeing a sort of - I don't want to use the word "churn" because that sounds negative - you're seeing an effect where other people can slot in where they had been. We have that \$750,000 investment in the Flex independent program to add another 25 clients in that and the new small options homes, as I indicated. This is the first . . .

MR. CHAIRMAN: Order, please. The time for the NDP caucus has expired.

The honourable member for Cumberland North.

MS. ELIZABETH SMITH-MCCROSSIN: I'm back, but I'm asking some questions on behalf of our Community Services Critic. She may be joining us, in which case, she'll take over, if that's all right. She wrote these questions, and I'm going to read them.

The first question is, in May 2015, the government announced that the SANE program would be established in Sydney and in another location. It is now more than two years later. Have those programs been established? If not, why? If not, when will they be up and running? What are the victims of sexual assault to do if a promised SANE program is not available?

MS. REGAN: Just to mention something that I was just in the middle of saying, that it has actually been 15 years since we had small options homes, or more than 15 years since we had small option homes built. The honourable member was asking me how that compared to previous years. I didn't have that right there, but it has been 15 years.

In terms of the SANE program, that's actually under the Department of Health and Wellness.

[6:00 p.m.]

MS. SMITH-MCCROSSIN: Second question, as the College of Social Workers has publicly said that changes to the Children and Family Services Act have increased their work load substantially. They said they were awaiting a meeting with the minister. Has that meeting taken place? If not, why?

MS. REGAN: The meeting has taken place with the ADM. In terms of the caseload, I actually just went through that whole list, and the caseload is below what is considered the

standard. We absolutely understand that the complexity of cases has increased. We see children with complex behaviours, et cetera, but the current caseload is below the standard.

MS. SMITH-MCCROSSIN: Third question, were you aware of the extra work load the legislative changes were placing on social workers? Have you increased the complement of social workers in the department? If no, why not? If yes, how much was budgeted? Was there training for social workers on the changes to the Act? If not, why not? If yes, how much and by who?

MS. REGAN: When the new Act was brought in, we trained right across the province. I think there are 800 workers, and we trained right across the province. That was anticipated, that we would need to do that.

What we're trying to do is reduce the administration that social workers have to perform. For example, if they're going to hire a psychologist, they have to find the psychologist, they have to bill them, et cetera. We're trying to alleviate that because we recognize that that can be an added pressure.

Earlier I was speaking to the NDP critic and explained that we're meeting with the managers to see if there are additional tools that we can give our social workers to make it easier for them to do their job. For example, providing a laptop so that they could complete their work wherever they are if they have a way to, rather than having to come back to the office and fill out forms and reports there. It's about trying to find ways to make the job easier and to reduce the amount of paperwork that they have to do along the way, but yes we did train for it.

MS. SMITH-MCCROSSIN: Unfortunately, last February there was the sad news that a 16-year-old who was in care died. At the time of her death, was this young girl considered missing? If yes, for how long had she been missing? What actions had been taken to find her? Was an investigation undertaken? What were the results of that? Were there changes instituted as a result of the investigation and what were they?

MS. REGAN: We would never speak to a particular case. I can tell you what our standards, our procedures are for that kind of thing, but we would never speak to an individual case. What I can tell you is, if a child in care is 15 minutes late, we treat that seriously. In fact, our workers are required to report that to the police.

Often when children in our care go missing, we know where they are. They sometimes just refuse to come back, but we know where they are. In any case where there was injury or death, we would do a joint investigation with police. If any recommendations come out of that, we absolutely would implement them. They're our children, they're in our care and we take that very seriously.

MS. SMITH-MCCROSSIN: I think you might be able to answer this question. It is with regard to the same case. Unfortunately, the mother of the girl found out about her daughter's death through social media. At the time, someone from the Department of Community Services said that police were responsible for notifications of death. The police said they are responsible for

notifying the legal guardian, which in this case was the province. Has anyone at the department worked on a policy to clarify this process in case there are any future similar cases?

MS. REGAN: I do want to let the honourable member know that we have, in fact, clarified the procedure with police, so that has been clarified, but we can't stop people from posting things on social media before the responsible party has notified parents. That happens all the time in a variety of cases these days. It's quite difficult. Police often talk about car accidents and family members seeing a photograph of a car accident before they know it's their family member. It's one of the challenges of living in a modern age, but I want to assure the honourable member that the procedure has, in fact, been worked out with the police.

MS. SMITH-MCCROSSIN: Thank you for the response. Last month, CBC reported that there was a staggering number of children missing from Nova Scotia group homes. How often does this occur? How long are they generally missing? What is the protocol if someone goes missing? What changes can be made to bring these numbers down?

MS. REGAN: I want to thank the honourable member for raising that particular news report because I felt that the - when a person actually reads down into the story you realize that, in fact, most of the children were not missing in the way that most of us would define missing. What it meant was that if a child was late by 15 minutes, that was reported to police as the child being missing. In the vast majority of cases, we know where they are; they just don't want to come home. But we take it seriously when they don't, because there are some children who are in our care for whom 15 minutes is huge. I can tell you that my kids missed curfew - two of the three. One was good. The other ones were a challenge, and 15 minutes would not have been unusual for them. But for some children in our care, it's a really big deal, and that's why we have that rule there.

I want to be really clear with the honourable member and with this House that that report had an inflammatory headline. I felt the rest of the report was pretty fair and balanced, but that headline made it sound like there were thousands of children missing. That's just simply not the case.

MS. SMITH-MCCROSSIN: Question seven, please detail how foster families and adoptive families receive funding for taking care of children.

MS. REGAN: Foster parents are paid on a per diem basis per child. There are different rates depending on the number of children and the behaviours that they exhibit. It's generally paid monthly.

We made a lot of changes over the last little while to make it easier, to encourage more people to be foster parents because, quite frankly, we know that children do better when they're in a family environment, and we want to encourage that. For a while there, the number of foster parents was decreasing. We're very pleased to say that they're up this year, and that's excellent.

In terms of giving allowances for various things like entertainment or transportation or whatever, these are people we trust to bathe our children. I think we can trust them if they say they have taken a child to a movie or whatever.

[6:15 p.m.]

Just to give you some idea, we have increased the respite rate to \$56 a day, and this includes the ability to pay for partial days of respite. We eliminated the reduced mileage rate at 16,000 kilometres per year. We have \$200 per child to help the foster parent obtain basic necessities for the child. We have \$150 per month autopayment for infants up to their first birthday, \$100 per month autopayment for babies ages one to three, and we have a \$30 per month autopayment for non-prescription items. There are a number of different changes that we have made over the last year or two to really help foster parents help children, because for us they are providing a wonderful service to our young people. We want to encourage them to do that. We want them to encourage other people whom they know who would be good foster parents, to actually become foster parents, because we have some foster parents who may age out of the system, just because at some point they will not be able to care for children anymore.

MS. SMITH-MCCROSSIN: There are federal tax credits for families who adopt children overseas. Why are there no similar provincial incentives to encourage domestic adoptions?

MS. REGAN: There actually are adoption subsidies available. If a family adopts a child with special needs, we can provide them with a variety of different payments. If there is special schooling, that kind of thing, we do that kind of thing.

There are not that many babies available for adoption. It is usually an older child and they often have more complicated cases. There are other issues there. In terms of international adoption, the numbers are actually way down in international adoption and that is because their host countries are not doing them as much anymore. There are a lot of countries that - formerly we did see a lot of babies adopted from China, for example. The countries of origin are just not doing those programs anymore.

MS. SMITH - MCCROSSIN: Next question, the budget for policy and innovations has increased substantially, please explain why.

MS. REGAN: So just to explain, \$2.9 million in transformation project costs are now being reflected in our budget. Previously it was held in restructuring but we are on our way, so that is \$2.9 million; \$2 million is for investment in the work to reduce poverty and then there is also nearly \$700,000 in implementation operating cost relating to the new DCS online channel, TCA project. That is providing online services to our clients.

MS. SMITH-MCCROSSIN: Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and thank you to the minister. Next question, the Association for Community Living attended the Standing Committee on Community Services last April. It is fair to say that they were frustrated by the pace of transformation. They said families are now disheartened that there seems to be a lack of progress

on moving forward in the direction that was framed in the original roadmap. The key recommendations have not begun, and families are once again losing hope that their sons and daughters will have full and meaningful lives with choices, person-directed planning, and living where and with whom they choose. What are you doing this year to remedy this problem?

MS. REGAN: Thank you to the honourable member. In fact, we have begun moving folks out - 37 people, I believe, through the Flex program, thus far this year.

Change takes time. I was explaining earlier that in addition to planning for change - and we have to be very careful about this. We have a lot of people who are counting on us for a variety of different things, so we can't - it's like re-decking the Macdonald Bridge, which was a complicated project, and they were able to do that over nights and weekends. We can't do that. We have to keep our bridge open, so we have to deliver programs to people, and they're counting on us for that, while we're creating change.

That is happening. It may not be happening as quickly as they like, and I absolutely acknowledge that, but it is happening as quickly as we can. We have to make sure that we do it safely. We can't do what they did in Britain and just shut down all the big institutions and chuck people out in the street. We're not going to do that. We're going to make sure they have an appropriate place to go.

Also, people have choice in this matter. Not everybody wants to go. That's the flip side. We do hear their frustration.

We have money for four small options homes this year and four again next year. Those are the first investments in small options homes in over 15 years.

I hear their frustrations. I was the Community Services Critic. I remember protests on this very issue when I was in Opposition. We are acting. It's coming along. It's not going to happen overnight.

MS. SMITH-MCCROSSIN: Next question, there are several adults with intellectual disabilities who have lived at home with their families. Unfortunately, their parents are aging and either can no longer look after their adult children or have passed away.

What resources are in place to care for these adults? How much money is attached to that plan? And finally, how many adults would be in this particular group?

MS. REGAN: So, I want to note that this is in fact a demographic that we need to pay attention to and we are. In fact, the budget for DSP supports has increased over 80 per cent in the last 10 years. So, it's a big increase.

In terms of folks who are living at home with their family, there are about 15,000 of them and - sorry, 1,500 - I just keep adding zeros on the end there. So, the challenge is real for aging parents. You know, I have a nephew who has a number of challenges and I can tell you that it is

something that my brother and his wife certainly do worry about what happens when they get older but you know, there are people on the wait-list, they move up the wait-list, et cetera, but with small options, if you look at the Flex Individualized Funding Program, we would spend about \$17,000 per person, who is living at home on the Flex Individualized Funding Program. They can purchase the services that they and their families determine that they need.

As you move up sort of the continuum of care, the cost rises. So, when you're talking about small options homes, you're talking about \$117,000, \$118,000 a year for that one person to be in that. So, it is a demographic that we're concerned about. We know we have challenges coming our way but we're continuing to work with folks and try to make sure that they're in the right place for them, not just what was available, but the right place for them.

MS. SMITH-MCCROSSIN: Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and thank you to the minister. I now have a few questions from the member from Northside-Westmount if that's okay. They are housing questions.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Order, please. minister, perhaps we'll take a very short recess if you would like to do an exchange and a quick break. A very short recess, then, we will take as of right now.

[6:28 p.m. The committee recessed.]

[6:32 p.m. The committee reconvened.]

MR. CHAIRMAN: The honourable member for Cumberland North.

MS. SMITH-MCCROSSIN: The member for Northside-Westmount's writing is not quite as neat as the former. First question is, \$38 million was funded in partnership with the federal government to increase access to affordable housing, including creating new affordable housing units. Where are these being built? When and how many do you expect?

MS. REGAN: Actually, the member for Northside-Westmount did ask me that question already. They will be built throughout the province. It is not all build. Some of it is rents-up money; some of it is construction of facilities for victims of violence. But it is spread out all across the province.

MS. SMITH-MCCROSSIN: Next question is, the province is investing in home repairs. How much money will there be allocated and how much has the threshold been increased.

MS. REGAN: There is \$16.4 million in our 2017-18 commitment for the home repair and adaptation programs. There are a number of different grant housing programs that we have. There is Access-A-Home, which provides assistance to adapt a home for wheelchair use and that it is for households with annual incomes of less than \$39,000 and the maximum assistance is \$5,000. In 2016-17 we did 29 units with that.

We do provide some small low-interest loans for home repairs and renovations for home owners with gross annual household income of \$35,000 or less. They have to have a good credit rating. The maximum loan is \$20,000. In 2016-17 we did 22 loans.

The Family Modest Housing Program provides mortgage funding to buy or build a modest dwelling and that is for low to moderate income households below \$50,000 of income, not the cost of the house. The maximum mortgage could be \$70,000. We did six mortgages in 2016 -17

There is the neighbourhood spruce-up program, which is to improve the condition, appearance, and safety of housing in a designated neighbourhood. Who can apply for it? It would be home owners and residential landlords in a designated neighbourhood. Home owners can get a one-time grant of \$3,000 and landlords \$2,000 per self-contained dwelling unit or \$1,500 per bed unit, up to a maximum of \$5,000. In 2016-17 Amherst was the focus of that. We did nine properties for a cost of \$18,805.

Then there's also the Housing Support Worker Initiative program, which is targeted to emergency shelter providers in HRM. It hires housing support workers to help persons who are dealing with homelessness find an appropriate place to live. In 2016-17, our workers helped 424 individuals transition to more stable housing.

MS. SMITH-MCCROSSIN: Next question, how is the Department of Community Services helping more people to stay at home? In particular, the member would like to know how much money is allocated or how much increased money will be allocated to help with things like snow removal and maintenance of lawn care, those sorts of household maintenance jobs.

MS. REGAN: Those kinds of activities would not be eligible under our agreement with CMHC. We don't provide grants for that kind of thing.

MS. SMITH-MCCROSSIN: Thank you to the minister for answering the questions on behalf of both the critic who was not able to be here, as well as our member for Northside-Westmount.

I did just want to make a final comment before I pass over to the NDP caucus. Earlier, I mentioned a very helpful manager from our area. I also wanted to make mention of someone else who has really stood out to me from your department. What my staff and I have found since we have started, is that there are a lot of different people with different roles and it's sometimes hard for the client, for our customers, as well as us to know who do we actually go to and who is responsible to fill certain roles. There's a woman, a disability support worker named Karen Fowler. She works out of Truro. She has been just exceptional with the client and with us. Even if it wasn't her role, she helped us to navigate. I just want to make mention of her. Thank you for the answers.

MS. REGAN: Thank you. I so appreciate hearing about folks in our department who go above and beyond the call of duty. I think it's important. So often we hear when somebody isn't performing. When we hear about folks who make such a difference in people's lives, it's really

important to make sure those names are shared and that they get kudos. All too often, we just hear about the negative things. When we hear about people who are doing that kind of God's work, we like to hear about it. Thank you.

MR. CHAIRMAN: The honourable member for Dartmouth North.

MS. SUSAN LEBLANC: Hello again. Since you have housing people here, I'm going to ask our housing questions, and then I'll go back to my other questions.

In 2016, the department underspent the Housing budget by \$5.9 million. That underspend included \$3.5 million in deferred federal contribution allotments earmarked for capital improvements; \$700,000 in uncommitted new rent supplement contracts; and \$1.5 million under commitment of housing renovations in affordable housing programs. My first question is, is the underspent \$5.9 million carried over into this year's budget?

MS. REGAN: I thank the honourable member for the question. Those are federal funds. So, if we don't spend them in one year, we can spend them later. They're not clawed back or anything like that. They can just roll out a little slower and sometimes that does happen.

MS. LEBLANC: Okay, thank you. So, given that, how much of the budget allocated to housing for this year is actually new investment by the province?

MS. REGAN: So, the estimate for 2017-18 reflects a \$2.1 million increase, of which \$1.1 million is funding granted to compensate for the decline in federal funding and a decrease in interest revenue as a result of a drawing down of the differed federal contribution balance. Another \$1 million is there that's part of our five-year plan to renew our housing stock, so, to do capital repairs and upgrades.

[6:45 p.m.]

MS. LEBLANC: Thank you for that. What is the department's budget this year for rent supplements?

MS. REGAN: There is \$10.3 million in the budget this year for rent supplement units.

MS. LEBLANC: How many clients do you expect to access the rent supplement during 2017-18?

MS. REGAN: What I can tell you is that as of August 2017, the number of rent supplement units we had was 1,532. Sorry that was July 2017.

MS. LEBLANC: Are the supplements available to folks who access not-for-profit housing?

MS. REGAN: They are available for profit landlords as well as not-for-profit housing organizations as well.

MS. LEBLANC: These are short snappers again, I am sorry I should have warned you. Does the department maintain a list of the private landlords who receive rent supplements?

MS. REGAN: The housing authorities actually pay the money to them. They would have that information and we don't have that at DCS.

MS. LEBLANC: To be clear, someone is keeping that list? I guess this is not for the department then, given that answer. Does somebody track how much money is paid in rent supplements to each private landlord?

MS. REGAN: We have a system called the Yardi system – I don't know what it stands for - that does monitor the various agreements because they do end. So they have to know when they end. So we do have, through the housing authorities we do see that. If you need to see those, we can access them for you, but we don't have that here with us.

MS. LEBLANC: My understanding of the rent supplements program is that it stays with the unit and not with the person. If that is the case, I am wondering if you might rethink that or, what your rationale is behind that.

MS. REGAN: That is actually something we were discussing earlier today because sometimes people may move and if that rent supplement doesn't follow them, it could be difficult. So, we are looking at that possibility. Thank you for raising it.

MS LEBLANC: That's great. Yes, I think that one of the issues that I see in Dartmouth North is that people won't move because they have a rent supplement and they might be living in a dangerous situation or in an untenable situation, so it would be great if they could just bring their supplement with them. Certainly it is a lot easier on housing support organizations as well. And not rewarding the landlord for bad living situations. I'm wondering if you've done any kind of cost comparative analysis - if that's the right term - to look at, in terms of the money spent on rent supplements versus that same amount of money invested in public housing stock that's provincially owned, and looking at it over a 20-year or 40-year time frame, to see what the difference in terms of the investments would be and the return on investment for the province.

MS. REGAN: Before the whole idea of rent supplements was in fact rolled out, my understanding is that was, in fact, looked at and we can actually reach and impact more people using rent supplements than we could doing builds.

MS. LEBLANC: Is there any money in the budget to increase funding or expand the programming of the Housing Support Worker Initiative program?

MS. REGAN: The budget for that program has remained stable this year. Last year I think it was \$450,000 and it helped over 400 people with precarious housing - who were in a homeless state or in danger of homelessness - find stable housing.

MS. LEBLANC: Is there any funding in the budget for the Housing First program?

MS. REGAN: There are about 50 rent supplements available through the Housing First program. About 37 of them are currently occupied, but there is money there for that.

MS. LEBLANC: You may have answered this already - I apologize, but I didn't hear the answer - is there any money in the budget to build new affordable not-for-profit housing?

MS. REGAN: We do provide that with either developers or with non-profits at a cost of about \$50,000 per door. There is no ceiling on that that says we're only going to do X or Y. If organizations come to us and want to do the build, then we make that available to them, but they come to us.

MS. LEBLANC: Is there any money in the budget to support co-op housing?

MS. REGAN: There are - 4,800 co-op and non-profit units are funded - receive subsidized housing funding through this budget.

MS. LEBLANC: So, about a year ago, there were about 800 non-elderly, single applicants on the wait-list for housing but, of course, they can only be housed once the wait-list is zero. So, I'm wondering if there is any money in this budget to specifically address the housing needs of non-elderly, single people.

MS. REGAN: So, in terms of our housing wait-list, the priorities are seniors and families first. Sometimes, if there are places where there are chronic vacancies, we can, in fact, support someone who is a non-elderly single and we can also use rent supplements. So we have a considerable number of those and an increase in those and I would point out that last year we decreased our wait-list by 10 per cent through, I would say, effective use of rent supplements. The commitment in our provincial campaign was a further reduction of 10 per cent again this year and then 10 per cent in each of the next two following years. So, that would see a drop in the wait-list of 40 per cent over those four years.

MS. LEBLANC: So, to be clear, if you're on the wait-list for housing, that's not the same as a wait-list for rent supplements?

MS. REGAN: I am sorry but Mr. MacDonald's explanation was so fascinating I forgot the question. Sorry, about that.

The rent supplement is a way that we can deal with the wait-list but there isn't a separate wait-list for rent supplements. A person may live in a community where there is no public housing and then we can get them a rent supplement.

MS. LEBLANC: Okay, so are people who are non-elderly singles, do they qualify for rent supplements or are they still at the bottom of the list?

MS. REGAN: So, the priority is still seniors and families but they can qualify for rent supplements.

[7:00 p.m.]

MS. LEBLANC: I think I got it. Okay. Thank you. So, as you know, I live in Dartmouth North and we have this great program around the Tufts Cove beautification project. I don't know what it's actually called. I apologise. I'm not trying to be sarcastic. I'm just wondering what the uptake on that program was this year, how many people took advantage of it, how much money was spent, and how you would determine the success of that particular program.

MS. REGAN: I actually only have the numbers for last year on what was spent because I think we're mid-year. That's why. But I can tell you that we have spent nearly \$300,000, which would be full utilization of that particular program.

MS. LEBLANC: That's good news. I'm wondering if you're going to repeat the program. Also, to clarify, I believe it was open for businesses as well to access. I'm wondering if any businesses accessed the money.

MS. REGAN: That particular program moves around from place to place. Last year it was in Amherst, as I was mentioning earlier. It does move from place to place. Businesses and landlords are eligible to participate.

MS. LEBLANC: Sorry, do you know if businesses in Dartmouth North took advantage of the program?

MS. REGAN: Landlords did.

MS. LEBLANC: Okay. I'm just going to go back to a couple of other questions that I had. This is going back to child protection services.

I wanted to ask, with all the new increases to the foster care program (Interruption) Yes, I think I'm finished with my housing questions.

MS. LEBLANC: My first question is, the new rates - I'll start by saying I think that foster families are amazing people. My uncle and aunt were foster families in Ontario. I know that they had an array of children who came through their home and were well-loved and supported by them and still are in good contact with them.

I wanted to know about the new rates and how they were developed. What research did you do around what would be useful and necessary? Can you provide analysis around those decisions to increase those rates? I'll ask that first, and then I can keep going.

MS. REGAN: We did a cross-jurisdictional review, and we consulted - I should say that our head of that section of DCS sits on a national group, and so they routinely talk to each other, find out best practices, et cetera. We also consulted with foster parents as well.

MS. LEBLANC: I'm wondering then, how the rates - like if you take a foster family with two kids, for instance, in care with them, how does that relate to the income assistance rates for a similar sized family? I'm just wondering if there is a formula that's used, and if there is, is it a similar formula for both types of situations?

MS. REGAN: They're similar in that assistance rates and foster family rates are calculated per child. The more children you have, the more assistance you receive - but they aren't currently linked. Will we be looking at the relationship between the two? Yes, we will.

MS. LEBLANC: I want to talk about food banks for a minute. As you know, we've seen an alarming increase in the number of Nova Scotians relying on food banks since 2013. Right now we have an increase of 7,500. What expenditures in this budget are targeted to make sure that Nova Scotians have access to affordable and healthy food?

MS. REGAN: We do fund several food banks: Glace Bay Food Bank Society, Feeding Others of Dartmouth, Feed Nova Scotia and Inner City Loaves and Fishes. Glace Bay Food Bank is \$20,700; Feeding Others of Dartmouth, \$39,700; Feed Nova Scotia, \$12,300; Inner City Loaves and Fishes in Sydney, \$26,800.

I should sort of take a moment - I think the other day in Question Period, I do believe the honourable member mentioned something about a cut to Feed Nova Scotia a number of years ago. In fact, Feed Nova Scotia was delivering a program, decided they didn't want to do it anymore and so they were no longer paid to deliver that program. I did want to make sure that I clarified that with the honourable member.

MS. LEBLANC: How much money is allocated in this budget for the Career Seek program?

MS. REGAN: I don't have that level of detail here. It's within the employment supports program there. So, we can absolutely get that for you. Okay.

MS. LEBLANC: Thank you. Sure, that would be great and if you could also get me these answers. How many participants are anticipated for this year? How many people received support from the program last year? That would be great.

I'd like to ask a question about the Prevention Innovation Fund. The grants established as part of the Sexual Violence Strategy for the Prevention Innovation Fund have been successful in

providing access to funding for a number of diverse organizations. So last year Avalon Sexual Assault Centre launched a crowdfunding campaign to raise money for the prevention and critical intervention services they provide. Can you describe how existing services like these are being supported through the renewed funding for the strategy and can you provide an update on where the department is in establishing multi-year funding agreements with those organizations?

MS. REGAN: So, I'm sorry, does the honourable member want a full list of prevention and intervention grants that went out or what we are going to . . .

MR. CHAIRMAN: Order, please. The time for the Committee of the Whole on Supply has expired for today.

The honourable Government House Leader.

HON. GEOFF MACLELLAN: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I move that the committee do now rise, report progress to the House and beg leave to sit again.

MR. CHAIRMAN: The motion is carried.

[The committee adjourned at 7:14 p.m.]



© 2017