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Chair

Mr. Dean Allison

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•(0830)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Dean Allison (Niagara West—Glanbrook, CPC)): Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2), our study on employability in Canada will commence.

I would like to take this time to thank all the witnesses for being here today and for taking time out of their schedules to help us with what we believe is an important issue. Certainly, here in Alberta, we understand that it's a very difficult issue as well in terms of the shortage of skills and labour, etc.

I just want to give you a few housekeeping notes. We will start with your seven-minute opening, then we will have a first round of seven minutes of questions and answers, and then a second round of five minutes.

We will start with you, Mr. Crowther, for seven minutes. I will give you a gesture at one to two minutes, just to let you know, if you're interested in the time. Thank you very much.

Mr. Kirk Crowther (Manager, Advocacy Leadership, Canadian Down Syndrome Society): Thank you.

I am going to actually turn it over to Mr. Dale Froese. He is going to speak on behalf of the Canadian Down Syndrome Society.

Mr. Dale Froese (VATTA Committee Member, Canadian Down Syndrome Society): Hi. My name is Dale Froese, and I'm from Kelowna, B.C. As a self-advocate, I asked to speak on behalf of the Canadian Down Syndrome Society. It's both an honour and a responsibility. Thank you.

I am a member of an advocacy group called VATTA, Voices at the Table Advocacy. The committee has twelve members from across Canada and we are all adults with Down syndrome. Along with CDSS, we have a strong belief in our mission to encourage credible opportunities for all Canadians with Down syndrome. We are the voice of adults with Down syndrome and the highest authority of the Canadian Down Syndrome Society. Yes, that is right—the highest authority.

I'll be speaking about employment issues in Canada for people with developmental disabilities. The VATTA committee has identified employment as an area of critical importance for Canadians with Down syndrome. Having a job is a matter of citizenship, quality, and personal dignity.

Like you, if someone were to ask me where I work, I would be embarrassed and feel bad if I had to say I don't have a job. It is important for all people to feel they are contributing to Canadian society. Most people make this contribution through employment. Research has shown that both advocates and employers have had poor success in the past in finding long-term jobs.

People with disabilities are often faced with a perception that they are unable or unwilling to work. When looking at employment opportunities, everyone must be part of the solution to create innovative opportunities and supports. This happens with any good employer. Why should we be different when hiring someone outside the box?

Relationship-based marketing is a very interesting concept. The idea behind this is to build a relationship based on collaboration and partnership with employers. This will build trust and benefits, and it promotes willingness for employers to hire people with disabilities, as well as to create an inclusive workplace. This type of employer-employee relationship will develop into good job retention, along with a desire by employers to envision an inclusive workplace.

I have worked at a flower shop for over nine years. My boss knows more about people with Down syndrome. If partnerships were formed to remove barriers, they would produce improvements in job variety and work hours and would support employment outcomes. The Alberta Premier's Council on the Status of Persons With Disabilities refers to a chamber of commerce study that revealed that workers with disabilities had an 80% lower turnover rate. Consider the financial savings to government agencies if people are employed over the long term.

The federal government can take an active role in creating and encouraging this type of relationship by offering incentives to businesses and employers, for instance, by providing development, training, education, and workplace accommodations. We would like to see new, innovative partnerships between government and private sector employers to identify barriers that could heighten the employment rate for Canadians of diversity; advocates who would like to be part of strategies and action; and plans that can develop and train people with the skills of relationship-based marketing.

The business rationale for employing people of diversity is about acknowledging people for who they are. It is about recognizing strengths and abilities, leveraging skills and talents, and finding good job fits. The rewards to businesses, and, more importantly, to people with developmental disabilities, include a mutually viable employee relationship leading to increased opportunities. A study from the U. S. found approximately 75% had direct encounters with persons with disabilities in business environments and that 92% of customers felt more favourable toward businesses that hired persons of diversity.

Workers with disabilities are often more aware, not less, of safety issues in the workplace, lowering insurance rates.

●(0835)

People with disabilities have relevant education to become creditably employed. Human Resources and Social Development Canada reports that Canadian adults with disabilities are about two-thirds as likely to have post-secondary education as adults with Down syndrome. In 1990, a study of different corporations found that 94% of employees with disabilities rated as average or better in job performance.

In November 2006, the Alberta government reported that there is a serious labour crisis.

The Voices at the Table Advocacy Committee has noted the social inequity of the minimum wage with exemptions for people with disabilities. For me to get paid less than minimum wage, I would feel underprivileged to get less money than someone doing the same job as me.

Only by engaging stakeholders and advocates can communities understand the contribution Canadians with disabilities can add to the workplace. The development of new relationships between advocates, service agencies, provincial and federal governments, employers, and people will facilitate change and create opportunities.

To leverage the power of diversity, we must maximize the capacity and value added by all people. The benefits are twofold. Employers retain skilled and committed staff and have access to long-term workers to enhance the workplace culture. People with disabilities gain confidence, skills, valuable workplace interactions, and the ability to support themselves to live independently.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Froese. We appreciate that.

We're going to move to Ms. Cohen, please, for seven minutes.

Just before you start your seven minutes, I would mention that you do have translation available, as some of the members may ask their questions in French. You can take that for the record. You don't need it right now, but you may when the questions start.

Ms. Cohen.

Ms. Jodi Cohen (President and Chair, Alberta Division, Canadian Mental Health Association): Thank you.

Good morning. On behalf of the Canadian Mental Health Association, thank you for this opportunity to speak to you. My

name is Jodi Cohen, and I'm the president of CMHA, Alberta division.

Secure income is one of the most critical social determinants of health. Access to meaningful, paid work is a basic human right of every citizen. Those who experience serious mental illness should have equal access to the fundamental elements of citizenship, which include housing, education, income, and work. This means that each individual has the right to be employed in a mainstream job, rather than being labelled as a client in a training program or a sheltered workshop.

Of all persons with disabilities, those with a serious mental illness face the highest degree of stigmatization in the workplace and the greatest barriers to mainstream employment. Adults and youth with psychiatric disabilities face many and varied employment obstacles, such as gaps in work history, limited employment experience, lack of confidence, fear and anxiety, workplace discrimination and inflexibility, social stigma, and the rigidity of existing income support and benefit programs.

The unemployment rate of persons with serious mental illness reflects these obstacles and has been commonly reported to range from 70% to 90%, depending on the severity of the disability. These statistics are particularly disturbing in light of the fact that productive work has been identified as a leading component in promoting positive mental health and in paving the way for a rich and fulfilling life in the community.

Over the past decade, our research findings have begun to challenge the long-held belief that persons with mental illness are unemployable, or at best, employable in low-wage, entry-level positions. Traditionally, many mental health professionals viewed employment as a stressful event that would likely cause people with mental illness to experience a relapse. It was commonly assumed that work was something one did as a therapeutic experience, or even worse, that work was not possible for this population.

As a result, the traditional approach to employment for persons with serious mental illness was to create separate, isolated environments exclusively for people with disabilities—for example, sheltered workshops. This approach often resulted in repetitive work with low expectations for career development, low satisfaction, few employment choices, and less than minimum wage earnings, and served to segregate the clients from society rather than foster community integration and full citizenship.

Through our national research initiatives we have learned that people who experience serious and persistent mental illness can hold responsible jobs and make significant contributions to their work, home, and leisure lives despite the diagnostic label or the level of the severity of their illness.

One critical finding has consistently emerged. It has been shown to be ineffective to plunge persons with serious mental illness from a history of chronic unemployment and instability directly into competitive employment. Individuals who have been most successful at finding satisfying work were those who were supported in viewing their entry or re-entry into a mainstream workforce as a longer-term goal and not as a one-step process.

Research has proven that there are numerous employment strategies that can be combined in different ways to help a person build connections, skills, confidence, and resilience, thereby leading to the ultimate goal of mainstream work. Individuals who are most successful at finding work and keeping work were those who continued to receive both formal support, such as mental health providers, vocational rehabilitation counsellors, therapists, etc., and informal support, such as friends, family, self-help or peer group, whether directly within their work environment or outside of work.

In light of these findings, mental health professionals have started to shift their understanding of the role employment can play in the recovery of persons with serious mental illness. Increasingly, employment has been seen as an important way for consumers to reclaim their social roles and rebuild their self-management skills so that they can take control of the major decisions affecting them.

By creating and implementing employment support strategies, CMHA's Routes to Work program has been helping to put people with a serious mental illness on the path to mainstream employment since 2000. We provide individuals who have psychiatric disabilities with assistance in areas such as skill development, education upgrading, career decision-making, résumé writing, job search, and employment maintenance.

This program is successful in seven communities across the country and has been able to continue on an annual basis with funding from the federal government's Opportunities Fund, a fund designed to assist organizations to support individuals with disabilities to find and maintain meaningful mainstream employment.

Over the years, the Routes to Work program has demonstrated overall its effectiveness for people with serious mental illness.

● (0840)

CMHA is very proud of the work it has done in this area and would welcome the opportunity to serve many more individuals with serious mental illnesses wishing to find mainstream employment in their communities. Through this program, and with funding from the Opportunities Fund, we are able to make a difference.

In conclusion, the Canadian Mental Health Association is a strong supporter of individuals experiencing mental illness having full citizenship in their communities, including the ability to find employment. Persons with disabilities, particularly those with serious and persistent mental illness, face some additional challenges. A person affected by a mental illness can work but may be prevented from doing so by stigma or the lack of a workplace that offers the necessary accommodations. CMHA is pleased to support individuals experiencing mental illness through such programs as Routes to Work, and believes Canada has benefited in many ways from such investments.

Fundamentally, if Canada is to ensure that all Canadians live fulfilling lives in their communities, then the employment challenges of persons affected by mental illness need to be addressed more fully. CMHA urges the federal government to expand such programs to assist organizations in providing the supports necessary for successful employment integration.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak.

● (0845)

The Chair: Thank you for being here this morning.

We're going to move to our next group.

Ms. Young and Ms. Huston, which one of you will be speaking?

Ms. Denise Young (Director, Community Development, Disability Action Hall): Both of us.

The Chair: Then I assume you want 14 minutes?

Ms. Denise Young: Absolutely.

The Chair: No, no, seven minutes.

Ms. Denise Young: We're not even sure how many minutes this will take.

I'm Denise Young, and this is Colleen Huston. We work with Disability Action Hall, a group of people with developmental disabilities and their allies who work together on issues that affect people with disabilities.

I just want to say that the process at this committee is kind of a formal, fast process for a lot of the folks we work with. We approached the challenge by sitting down and talking with people and getting direct quotations from them about their experiences in work. We've loosely organized their comments under topics. I'm going to introduce the topic areas and then Colleen is going to read their words about their experiences.

We started off initially just talking about jobs and about people's difficulties in finding jobs. They wanted to tell you some stories.

First, they told us that we need governments to create business-employer engagement programs to make Canada's workplace more accessible and safer for people with disabilities by educating business owners and managers.

Ms. Colleen Huston (Member, Disability Action Hall): These are their words:

We need more accommodating bosses who take time to train us.

I find the applications and resumes too hard to apply. I need help filling them out. I don't like going alone.

I need an employer who understands that if you're sick and need to go into the hospital, when I am better, I can go back to my job.

Sometimes my co-workers think I am trying to intimidate them if I stand too close because I am so big.

Ms. Denise Young: Second, we need a strong employment equity provision so that they can secure a job for more than three months. Many of the folks are able to find jobs. There are lots of jobs in the Calgary market; the difficulty is in keeping those jobs.

We need better policies and better enforcement policies that would make it mandatory for employers to accommodate workers with disabilities by providing longer and more intensive training.

Ms. Colleen Huston: Again, this is what they told us:

When I apply for a new job, I don't know if I should say I have a disability. I still get fired because I can't learn the job. When I say nothing, I still get fired because I am not fast enough.

It takes me longer than the average person to learn a new job, but employers fire me before three months are up. More training for people with disabilities, we deserve training especially when we are over 30.

I cannot work as fast as some people and I feel I am penalized for my disability because my hours are reduced.

Agencies should help you get to the work you want, not just throw you into a sheltered workshop.

Ms. Denise Young: Next, they need to work for a living wage. I'm sure you've heard about the minimum wage exemption permits in Alberta that allow employers to pay less than minimum wage to people with disabilities. But even minimum wage labour in a city like ours, which is very expensive to live in, isn't enough to meet people's needs and give them the ability to live a decent life, not a life of poverty.

Ms. Colleen Huston: In their words:

Pay people fairly. A living wage is a human rights issue when it's less than \$10 an hour.

I worked three part-time jobs to make ends meet.

There is not enough motivation to stay healthy and take a break to rest. We do not make enough money because of the \$400 restriction.

That's the restriction on assured income for the severely handi-capped.

If I take a holiday to rest, I am behind on my bills.

The Alberta "minimum wage exemption permit" is a violation of human rights.

My agency said they would pay me \$7 an hour to work at a sheltered workshop, they haven't yet.

It's nice to be promoted.

Ms. Denise Young: This is a huge area for our folks. Many of the rules around laws and legislation related to employment are not in accessible language, so people don't know the rules governing workplaces.

• (0850)

Ms. Colleen Huston: They said:

I don't understand who I go to if my boss says things that are unfair.

I do not know who my union leader is or how they can help me. I don't know all the rules if people are unfair.

I work with a boss who picked on one of my co-workers. I didn't say anything, but I asked to be transferred to another team.

Ms. Denise Young: We need labour standards and laws to protect us from harassment and bullying in the workplace.

Ms. Colleen Huston: They said:

Bullying on the job is a real problem. One time my co-worker locked me in the freezer for five minutes and another time outside in the freezing rain. It was hard because I just wanted to quit.

If I get paid the same as my co-worker, why do I do more work? Why does my co-worker get to sleep and do his homework on the job?

Ms. Denise Young: We need affordable, available, and accessible transportation to be able to get to work and to get home from work.

Ms. Colleen Huston: They said:

Access Calgary as special needs transportation is not reliable. It is hard to book. I lose my job because my bus does not show up on time.

We need a cheap bus pass to get to our jobs. Our city says we need to make this pass available only to people who make less than \$15,000 a year, but I don't qualify. I live below the poverty line, but I cannot get the pass.

Ms. Denise Young: Our provincial programs do not help us enough with our medical and housing needs. We need policies in place to protect and maintain our health to stay employed.

Ms. Colleen Huston: They said:

I had to quit the job because my boss didn't want to make adaptations for my wheelchair in the bathroom.

I need a power chair, so I can work in places.

Our government benefits don't cover enough. I would like health benefits at the workplace. Some of us don't get benefits at work or government support. If we get sick, we are doomed.

We cannot afford another increase in rent. It is difficult to work when you do not know where you are going to live.

Ms. Denise Young: Many of our issues are overseen by provincial law, but we certainly see a federal role in some of the areas. One is taking a leading role in working across levels of government. We can give you an example. Ireland has done some really innovative stuff to supplement wages if people are performing at a level that's slightly lower than other co-workers. There are some interesting programs out there that we'd love people to explore.

Look at the cutbacks. When federal moneys come through and then they get clawed back at the provincial level, that's a real barrier for people.

Thank you very much for listening to us.

The Chair: Thank you both for that presentation.

We're going to move to Ms. Johnston and Ms. Willocks.

Ms. Ramona Johnston (Director, Vibrant Communities Calgary): Thank you.

Good morning. Vibrant Communities Calgary brings together individuals concerned about poverty and its effects, and it works at the policy level to develop and implement long-term strategies to address the root causes of poverty in our communities. Partners include Calgarians living on low incomes and representatives from government, business, labour, base communities, non-profit organizations, health and education, and the community at large. We are part of a national network of 16 vibrant communities across Canada, and we thank you for the opportunity to make this presentation on employability issues.

We believe that when people live in persistent financial distress, the whole community pays through increased cost to the health care, education, social service, and criminal justice systems, and to our local economy, in lower spending on goods and services. Reducing poverty in Calgary will improve the quality of life for all of us and make our city an even more attractive location for investment.

Calgary's economy is thriving, but we know that a rising tide does not lift all boats. Many individuals and families are actually falling further behind as a result of the increased cost of living and lack of affordable housing. In 2004, over 13%, or 127,000 Calgarians, lived below Statistics Canada's low-income cut-off. What's more, almost 90% of these low-income Calgarians do not receive any provincial or federal income support benefits. In the first six months of this year, despite a booming economy, over 67,000 employed Calgarians were still earning less than \$10 an hour, an amount that would not even allow an individual without dependants, working full-time, to meet the low-income cut-off line. That's almost 14% of employed Calgarians still earning poverty-level wages.

In light of the persistent problem of poverty in Calgary, we will highlight just a few of the recommendations from our written submission made in September.

Across Canada, real minimum wages have been shrinking for decades, with many low-wage workers no longer able to support themselves or their families. We fully support the principle underlying the recent Arthurs' report on federal labour standards that no worker should receive a wage that is insufficient to live on. We further support the submissions provided to the inquiry that the federal minimum wage should be set to a living wage level, starting at \$10 an hour and indexed to inflation. This would allow workers and their families to meet basic needs, maintain a safe and decent standard of living in their communities, and save for future needs and goals.

The federal government can also demonstrate leadership to assist vulnerable workers through increased education and more active enforcement of employment standards through the Canada Labour Code. For example, the federal Arthurs' report found that more than one in ten employers covered by the code failed to provide three weeks of vacation to employees with ten years of service, even though they are entitled after six years. More than half have given time off in compensation for overtime rather than premium pay, as the law requires.

In Calgary, approximately 50% of our visible homeless population has full-time employment. Vibrant Communities Calgary would like to see all three levels of government, business, social agencies, and the community work together to create, implement, and measure progress on a coordinated long-term plan to address homelessness and affordable housing.

We also recommend comprehensive reforms to employment insurance to address the significant decline in coverage of the unemployed and the related decline in access to employment supports and training. Previous changes to the EI program have disproportionately impacted part-time and other non-standard workers, typically women, youth, visible minorities, immigrants, and low-income workers. Reforms should include a decrease in the number of hours required to qualify, the reintroduction of eligibility for workers who quit voluntarily or are dismissed with cause, and a process for the growing self-employed workers to contribute to and be eligible for EI benefits.

Recent cutbacks in federal funding, such as the Western Diversification Fund, have negatively impacted many community initiatives that were making sustainable inroads in the fight against poverty. The social economy and community economic development need to be reinstated as a federal priority.

I will now invite my colleague to highlight some of our recommendations on the employability of new immigrants.

•(0855)

Ms. Lori Willocks (Settlement Coordinator, Calgary Immigrant Aid Society , Vibrant Communities Calgary): Good morning. My name is Lori Willocks. I work as a settlement coordinator at the Calgary Immigrant Aid Society.

Immigrants play an increasingly important role in Canada's growth and economy, but many newcomers are forced into jobs that

are far below their training and qualifications. This is making Canada a less attractive destination of choice for new immigrants.

In fact, a recent StatsCan report shows that one in six highly educated male immigrants leaves Canada within one year of arrival due to the job market. Because of this, we have a few recommendations.

We recommend providing potential immigrants with clear and accurate information about working in Canada prior to their immigration.

We recommend increasing the funding for language programs that offer occupation-specific language training, employment preparation, and paid work placement.

We recommend providing child care support and more flexible hours for ESL students to improve accessibility.

We also recommend offering incentives to employers who will provide work placements or internships to immigrants to help them gain Canadian work experience.

Vibrant Communities Calgary believes that the Government of Canada has a strong role to play in the elimination of poverty in our community. Federal and provincial programs are intertwined, and solutions to these issues cannot be found unless both levels of government work together and address the barriers as well as the opportunities.

Further, government programs need to be reviewed and designed in light of current social and economic conditions. In an economy such as Calgary's, job transitions are not only possible but essential for efficiency gains.

Good social program design strongly reinforces good economic performance.

If government programs prevent these efficiency gains, individual workers suffer and it is detrimental to the economy as a whole.

We hope you will act quickly on these recommendations, as the situation of low-income Calgarians is becoming increasingly serious and has far-reaching consequences for our entire community.

I thank you for the opportunity to speak today.

The Chair: Thank you very much, ladies, for your presentations.

We're now going to start our first round of seven minutes. Mr. Regan, you start us off.

•(0900)

Hon. Geoff Regan (Halifax West, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I want to begin by thanking all of you for coming in and speaking to us this morning. The information you are giving us first-hand is obviously very valuable to the work we're trying to do.

A number of you talked about the need for incentives or subsidies to help people gain workforce experience. I wonder if you'd like to describe, first of all, what you think the Government of Canada's role should be in that and why it should be the Government of Canada as opposed to the Province of Alberta, for example, and how they ought to work to be effective.

Who would like to start?

Ms. Lori Willocks: There are a number of programs out there at the moment. For example, where I work there is the youth internship program, and we are working primarily with new immigrants.

It is offering an incentive in terms of subsidizing some of the salary. A lot of times employers will not automatically hire immigrants. This is a way to top up wages and give the employers the incentive to hire immigrants.

We're finding many of these employers are keeping these people on after their internship is finished. So it's a way to try to bring in the business community to hiring people they may not have hired in the past.

Hon. Geoff Regan: There's a youth employment strategy. Where does the funding come from for that?

Ms. Lori Willocks: From the federal government.

Hon. Geoff Regan: Would you care to comment?

Ms. Denise Young: Sure. The program in Ireland I referred to was a program whereby an individual would go for a job in a competitive environment, and then somebody would come and assess the level they were performing at. So if they were performing at, let's say, 40% of an average worker in that environment, the employer would be required to pay 40% of the wages and the other 60% would be topped up. Then they would repeatedly reassess, and if they were performing at 75%, then the government would cover 25% of the wages and the employer would cover 75%.

We don't understand a lot about who's doing which program in government. We're looking at it from the perspective of the individual. We would love to encourage all levels of government to work together to figure out how people can live decent lives.

Ms. Colleen Huston: I was an employment worker for about eight years, and the first thing employers ask in Alberta is if they can pay a person less than the minimum wage. That's just a reality. I don't think the Alberta labour standards or regulations are strong enough. The labour standards vary from province to province.

We need national support to encourage employment, because a lot of people would like to have something to do with their day. Volunteer work is an option for some people. Some people can't work and choose not to work, but for those people who want to contribute to society, we need the strength of the national government to support those efforts.

Mr. Dale Froese: I totally agree with Colleen.

Thank you.

Mr. Kirk Crowther: I think of some of the research that Dale and I have done.

There are still three provinces in Canada that have minimum wage exemptions. It would be nice if the federal government could

legislate something, where provinces would not be allowed to discriminate against people. One thing Dale pointed out when we started this process is that it really devalues people to actually have to have a permit to work. It's not a hunting licence. It's a permit to contribute to Canada. You have to have that if your employer is offering those minimum wage exemptions.

We were really disappointed to find that there were still some problems.

Hon. Geoff Regan: I don't think the Government of Canada can tell a provincial government what its labour standards or minimum wage laws have to be. Clearly, the Charter of Rights and Freedoms applies, but remember, it was eventually agreed to by not just the one government, but all governments, except for Quebec, unfortunately. It's a multilevel thing. That's a challenge.

I'd like to ask a question. I'm not sure which one of you mentioned the social economy initiatives and the cuts to that program, but for those who saw a benefit from that program, I'd like to hear how it worked for you. Explain to me, if you would, what the positive impact of that program was in your community.

Ms. Ramona Johnston: Mr. Chair, I'll start.

I'm very familiar with two programs in Calgary—although I know there were many more—that were negatively affected as a result of the recent cutbacks.

One is the women and a fair income project. It was a photo-voice project. Women living on low income in Calgary went through quite an amazing process, where they took photos of objects and people in their lives and told stories about those photos. It has been an incredibly powerful initiative over the last few years. A group of about twelve women have now created this photo-voice display. They go to community events. They have now actually travelled throughout Alberta and other communities across Canada to show this photo-voice display.

It's been very empowering for those individuals who were involved in the project. Actually, the photo-voice display was displayed last night at a poverty forum. People read the captions and look at these pictures. It really puts a face on poverty, which is important in our community, because poverty does tend to be so invisible.

That has been an incredible initiative, but they are struggling to continue because their funding was cut recently.

Another initiative—

• (0905)

Hon. Geoff Regan: I will just interrupt for one second. Tell me what that has done for those twelve women.

Ms. Ramona Johnston: Well, I hesitate to speak on their behalf

Hon. Geoff Regan: I understand.

Ms. Ramona Johnston: —but I know a few of them personally who have gone on to participate in other community initiatives. They feel more empowered. They feel that they now have a voice. A couple of them are actually involved in some of the initiatives we are working on around low wages and affordable transportation. They've taken what they learned and experienced through that photo-voice display project to do other things and be more active in their community.

The other initiative I am familiar with is run by a community economic development organization here in Calgary. It's called Momentum, which was formerly MCC Employment Development. That initiative is called the social purchasing portal. There is actually a series of them across Canada. It originated in Vancouver. We started about a year and a half ago with the social purchasing portal here in Calgary.

The idea behind it is to connect large purchasers of goods and services with smaller suppliers of those goods and services. So it's connecting these small suppliers—organizations or businesses that wouldn't normally have the access to a larger market. They have agreed they will be progressive in their workplace practices. These small suppliers have committed to paying a living wage to all their employees, starting at \$10 an hour. They are also looking at other progressive employment practices such as benefits and assisting with child care and transportation. Of course, the larger purchasers feel this is a way for them to be socially responsible, to purchase their goods and services from these progressively responsible smaller suppliers.

It's been an amazing initiative. It's still in its infancy in Calgary. They are just gathering suppliers and purchasers. It actually has an Internet component—hence the portal piece—so people can connect online.

Unfortunately, it was funded through the Western Diversification Fund. That federal funding has now been completely cut. Other funders in the community are trying to pick up those pieces to make sure the program can continue.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Johnston.

Mr. Lessard will be asking his questions in French. I encourage you to put on your headsets if you need some help with translation.

Monsieur Lessard, sept minutes, s'il vous plaît.

[Translation]

Mr. Yves Lessard (Chambly—Borduas, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I would also like to thank you for being here this morning. This committee is travelling right now to be able to meet people like you. Those who can afford it can always be heard in Ottawa. So, it is a privilege for us to welcome you here, and I want to thank you, especially because the content of your remarks will be very useful, I am sure.

We have before us three organizations that are more particularly concerned with disabled people's issues. My first question will be on Mr. Froese's presentation. Later on, I would like to deal with access to employment and job retention for disabled workers.

You just said that your committee has twelve members throughout Canada. Could you explain a bit more what you mean by that? I am trying to see how representative this committee is. Do you mean twelve member organizations?

• (0910)

[English]

Mr. Dale Froese: There are twelve members. We're the voices at the table for advocacy. I am actually one of them. I'm from Kelowna, B.C. They travel across Canada too.

Thank you.

Mr. Kirk Crowther: The committee looks at speaking on employment issues on behalf of individuals with disabilities. This committee of twelve is basically the voice of adults with Down syndrome in Canada. They respond back to our board with information on areas of concern. Employment is one of three key areas that these twelve adults from across Canada have identified as a problem area. So they're basically researching. They're looking for opportunities in their own community to present, to speak at panels like this about employment issues and outcomes, certainly, for people with disabilities.

[Translation]

Mr. Yves Lessard: Thank you for the clarification.

Each one of you talked about what a job means for people as human beings and about how they are perceived in their work environment. Somebody mentioned the feeling of shame when one does not have a job. And when one has a job, it is difficult to become part of the work environment and to develop a human dimension in the workplace.

This depends a lot on the capacity of the employer to welcome the employee in his or her organization. The employer needs a bit of preparation for this, and you talked a little bit about that. I stand to be corrected, but this is a bit of a challenge because it means the employer needs what I will call a positive action policy. It means they have to have a number of jobs for people with a handicap and functions that are appropriate for them. Most workplaces are organized, they have a union, job structures, job classifications, and so on. The employer has to check in various jobs the functions that can be given to disabled workers.

I am telling you this because it is the way I see this situation, and the opportunity to better include handicapped workers in the workplace and have them take part in this inclusion.

Do you see things the same way?

[English]

Ms. Colleen Huston: Well, many organizations have intelligence quotient cut-offs. A lot of people who are employable don't qualify for provincial service programs. Those who do qualify don't have enough employment supports. It's been proven that when a person has a support worker on the job, after they've secured the job for long-term employment, people can hold jobs for ten years. We find that is the key to people keeping their jobs, having that employment support.

Sadly, there was a great program that was funded federally to help people whose intelligence was too high but still had fetal alcohol spectrum disorder, and they've been affected; they've been cut. And they cannot keep those jobs beyond six months.

We think a support worker helps. People who cannot be taught those social normalcies have to be taught how to survive in such an inhuman environment.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Yves Lessard: To make such a policy on inclusion in the workplace a success, we have in Quebec a piece of legislation which provides for a contribution of 1% of the payroll for training.

Could we also set a percentage of handicapped employees for each employer, a number of support workers, and minimal standards to make inclusion easier? I am trying to find out what we could do to promote integration in the workplace.

• (0915)

[*English*]

Ms. Denise Young: You're talking about some kind of affirmative action program. I can't see Albertans being too big on affirmative action programs, but I think it's a fabulous idea. You were talking earlier about things like job carving—helping employers understand that maybe jobs could be packaged a bit differently, so if there are areas that are difficult to work in, people could take portions of different jobs. I think there are some employer education pieces as well. I would certainly support an affirmative action type of program.

Ms. Colleen Huston: I agree that a Canadian disabilities act would be a great thing to have, very similar to the American disabilities act. I know that the Conservative government promised in the stand-up for 2006 to look at a Canadian disabilities act. We look forward to helping you participate in creating that. We know that in 1996 the Liberal government created a 50-page document on what that could look like, and we hope you can use some of that.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Lessard.

Mr. Martin, please.

Mr. Tony Martin (Sault Ste. Marie, NDP): Thank you very much for being here. I heard on a number of occasions this morning the term “poverty” used very powerfully. You would think, living in the east and hearing all of the good news coming out of the west, that there would be no poverty out here.

I was at a forum last night where the room was packed—standing room only—with people very concerned about the emerging and worsening reality of poverty in Calgary. Any of us who have been close to it know that nobody chooses to live in poverty. It's just a myth out there that some people choose to live in poverty, enjoy living in poverty, or that living in poverty at a subsistence level of income is somehow this wonderful life.

I also discovered last night, hearing stories from people, and this morning listening to you, that often poverty is exacerbated by bad public policy. We don't seem to be able to get it together to help people who are struggling. Most people want to work and would love to work, but there are roadblocks they can't seem to get over.

I was a member of the NDP government in the early nineties when Ontario brought in the Employment Equity Act. It was an amazingly comprehensive and progressive piece of legislation, but did it ever get hammered out in the public, particularly by the Conservatives. They don't seem to understand the importance and the need for employment equity and creating opportunities, particularly for people with disabilities and mental health issues, to actually get into the workplace and work and stay there. We all know they have something to offer.

I spent a couple of hours after the poverty forum going to the shelter, walking the streets, and seeing what was going on in downtown Calgary. As this committee travels, we hear the Conservative members particularly—I'm disappointed that none of the Calgary members are here this morning to hear you—say that if there's an unemployment problem in other parts of the country, we should simply tell people to move to Calgary, move out west. There are jobs here and wealth to be had. There's money growing on trees, I guess.

I'm finding that there are problems for the people already here, and they can't get the jobs. In fact, moving hordes of people out here is just exacerbating the problem. I was in Victoria and we saw the same problem. There was a stock of affordable housing, but it's now being taken up by these new people who are coming in. They're pushing the poor out into the shelters and on the street.

What message would you want to send to government around that kind of reality? What is the real story?

• (0920)

Ms. Jodi Cohen: One comment that I'd like to make is about the issue of affordable housing. Whether you're talking about people with mental illness, people with disabilities of any kind, or people living in poverty, affordable housing is an absolutely critical issue, particularly in Calgary.

I'm a native Calgarian. I remember when we had 300,000 people. We now have a million. The incidence of homelessness is rising proportionately. Every year, we're struggling with all sorts of emergency issues, like trying to not have people freeze on the streets.

Cutting across all three levels of government—I happen to work for the municipal government—the municipal, provincial, and federal governments need to get together and do a whole lot more on affordable housing. That's a really key thing in terms of addressing poverty, in terms of supporting people with disabilities. It cuts across a huge spectrum of issues. If nothing else were done but affordable housing, we'd see huge improvements in our world.

Mr. Tony Martin: You're talking about a national housing strategy perhaps.

Ms. Jodi Cohen: Yes.

I'm not an expert on housing issues. I know there have been some initiatives. There have been pieces here and pieces there, but there needs to be a more comprehensive strategy. There's opportunity for the federal government in dealing with a number of different issues, but when there is a national strategy—

Certainly, the Kirby commission released a report, and it's really promoting the formation of a mental health commission. Whether you're dealing with mental health issues or disability issues or housing issues or poverty issues, there's a real place for federal leadership and initiative, recognizing that there are jurisdictional issues. Health is a provincial issue, and I recognize that, but I think there's a real opportunity for federal leadership in doing more national kinds of strategies to address some of these issues.

Mr. Tony Martin: What about a guaranteed annual income? Is that something you would support or see as helpful?

Ms. Jodi Cohen: Lots of people would benefit from that.

I was listening to CBC this morning. There was an item about a study in Saskatchewan, in Saskatoon, that determined that income affects health, and I kind of went, "Yeah, like, this is not rocket science". In social determinants of health, income and housing are critical. So if we're talking about a guaranteed income, that addresses a lot of the issues that affect a lot of people.

Mr. Tony Martin: Have any of you given that any thought?

Ms. Denise Young: In regard to a guaranteed annual income, you have to be very careful how it's phrased, because there's one sort of guaranteed annual income that gives you enough to live on, and then there's the other one that gives you a guaranteed annual income, but after that you're on your own. The latter one really does concern me, because for lots of people with disabilities, the costs related to medical, housing, and other issues are hard to cover, and if you're on your own on those, they're too expensive. So it has to be a real living wage or a guaranteed annual income, but also with the community supports in place if you need additional supports. That's critical.

I would love to echo the housing thing. Housing is the biggest-ticket item for people who are living in poverty. There is lots of money in Calgary, but we don't share it equally. There are a number of people who are on fixed incomes and they're really suffering at this point. Their numbers are probably smaller than the numbers in other areas of Canada, but the cost of living all around them is just going up so much that people just can't keep up.

Mr. Tony Martin: I saw the pictures last night that you were talking about. They were phenomenal. What a project that is. I'm really disappointed it's not continuing, because that sort of thing gives other people confidence to get out and do something.

One of the things I noted last night was a thread running through some of the stories I heard: that people with mental health issues or disability issues or family issues have to leave the workplace from time to time because of their situation, and that immediately drops them into a poverty reality. The changes that were brought into employment insurance now see maybe only, if we're lucky, a quarter of the people who pay into employment insurance actually able to qualify to collect. Is that something we could be looking at changing to improve the lot of some of the folks on whose behalf you speak?

Ms. Ramona Johnston: Absolutely, and that was one of our recommendations. We know many other organizations, both here in Calgary and across Canada, are very supportive of going back and revisiting those changes that were made and that had extremely negative impacts.

Specifically, we would recommend the reduction of the current qualification requirement for eligibility from its current 910 hours back to 700 hours; a reduction of entrance requirements in low unemployment areas; reconsideration of the eligibility rules from the Employment Insurance Act in order to compensate for women's current inequalities in accessing these benefits, owing to their non-standard employment patterns; consideration of raising the benefit levels for parental leave under the EI Act; and development of an addition within EI to extend coverage to self-employed and non-standard workers, to reflect the changing dynamics. We know so many people now who are contracted out. It's a growing phenomenon.

● (0925)

Mr. Tony Martin: There's also the phenomenon of agencies. That was something that came up as well. The agencies hire people, hire them out, and then take a premium piece off the top.

The Chair: Thanks, Mr. Martin. I gave you two extra minutes. I'll get them back from you next time. How does that sound?

Ms. Yelich, you have seven minutes.

Mrs. Lynne Yelich (Blackstrap, CPC): I thank you all for attending this morning. We are working on a disability act, but it's a huge encounter. We're trying to decide what "disability" is going to look like in terms of a definition.

Especially, I'm interested in hearing the mental health association this morning. We have to decide how to frame that in a disability act. I'd like to hear whatever you have to say about that if you were to define "disability" in a disability act. That would be an important part.

Dale, I really enjoyed your presentation. I know we don't have a full copy of it, so I'm hoping you will get one to the committee.

I also wanted to mention to you, Denise, your points about Ireland having a model. I'm interested in hearing a little more on that.

And I just want to make a comment on affordable housing. In the eighties, there was a real initiative to have affordable housing in a lot of villages in our province. Unfortunately, we're only forty miles from a city that is really growing and thriving, so we are finding that the houses are empty. During that time, a lot of money was invested. The people are now moving out of our communities, so our provincial government is now selling the houses off to people who are using them as cabins and second homes.

When you talk about a federal initiative, I would find that it might be a problem, because we really don't want to see those.... They were little units, and you may have had them in this province. They were duplex units for seniors and disabled people. At one time, it was a really good idea and it was very exciting to have these in our community. There were at least ten units, and two of them are being sold off for cabins, as I said. A lot of money went into them, so it's disappointing. I think it also goes to show that perhaps the province has to get a little more engaged in making sure they don't sell them off.

We are living just outside of a city. I wondered if there should be some encouragement in some way for people to move into these communities, not through legislation or regulation, but through some sort of incentive to move out of the cities, which is where, you're telling me, the communities are really having a tough time when it comes to affordable housing.

Given that, I'll start with each and every one of you who wants to answer.

Mr. Crowther, how would you see "disability" as a definition in a disability act?

Mr. Kirk Crowther: From our viewpoint, it's critical to include advocates in the actual process of defining that disability act. "Where the rubber meets the road" is really our perspective. That decision should be based on the needs and voices of the people who are affected by the legislation, the rules or regulations, or the act that's being made.

Mrs. Lynne Yelich: I wanted to ask you if you're familiar, being in Saskatchewan, with the Cosmopolitan and SARCAN in Saskatchewan. Do you have something similar in Alberta? Many of the Down syndrome people are employed there, and it is just an awesome example of what we can do in smaller communities with our environment.

It's excellent and it's exciting to go there. I always visit their establishments, and they're really awesome. I wondered if you were familiar with that or if you have something like it in this province.

• (0930)

Mr. Kirk Crowther: We are familiar with it. As far as something that's Down-syndrome-specific is concerned, there's nothing like that in Alberta. Certainly they do good work there. Our concern, I guess, is that even though they're in the communities, we're still tending to see that kind of workshop mentality.

Mrs. Lynne Yelich: Have you visited there? They've built some awesome things and they're very much a part of the community. They do patrols.

Mr. Kirk Crowther: Yes, but I guess they're still clumped together. They're not—

Mrs. Lynne Yelich: They have the support staff, though. It's almost one on one, which also is very good. The environment is really healthy.

Mr. Kirk Crowther: Right. The one-on-one support, as Colleen was saying, is critical to that employment.

Mrs. Lynne Yelich: I think it takes a lot of will on the part of the community. It's the community's particular outlook. For example, in Saskatoon, at the Cosmopolitan centre, the work by those with Down syndrome is something to be reckoned with. In fact, I'm told that the best golf clubs are made there, at Cosmopolitan. I actually know someone personally who is picked up at the door by the bus and is taken over there.

So that certainly is a good model. It's something for you to encourage your provincial and municipal governments to look at.

Would you like to say something, Dale?

Mr. Dale Froese: Yes, I would, actually.

I am glad you brought this up. I know firsthand how to live like a Down syndrome person because I am a Down syndrome person.

We have orchestrated a support group in Kelowna, B.C., the Angels Community Support Network. If you are interested, we can hook you up in that department also. Just talk to me and we'll hook you up.

Thank you.

Mrs. Lynne Yelich: All right. Very good. Thank you.

Ms. Jodi Cohen: I'd like to make a comment about the disability act in relation to people with mental illness. There are challenges in terms of mental illness being an episodic issue. People may have periods of health and then periods of illness. It's not a permanent, ongoing disability, and I think one of the challenges is trying to address that and make provisions for the periods of being disabled.

So the fact that it isn't necessarily a permanent disability is one of the challenges.

Mrs. Lynne Yelich: It's taking shape, but it's going to take some time. Certainly right now we are working on it and meeting with groups.

Mental health has particularly interested me in terms of how we're going to handle that. It's not just the challenge that it's episodic, as you say, but also that there are those who don't really describe themselves as being mentally ill. We have the issue of autism. Is that a disability or is it a health issue? When it comes to employability and making an act where we are going to try to enforce employers to employ disabled people, where will the mental health segment fit in?

At any rate, thank you. We will be talking to you again. We've already had some time together.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Yelich. That's all the time you have.

We're going to move now to our second round.

Mr. Regan, five minutes, please.

Hon. Geoff Regan: Thank you.

On the issue of housing, let me ask you further about the strategic communities partnerships initiative. The minister was before the committee last week, and I asked her if it would be continuing past March 31, 2007. She would not commit to that. I think it's under review or is being examined.

I guess I'd like to know what's been good about it and what's been bad about it. Should it be scrapped and started over? What's your view on it?

Ms. Ramona Johnston: I don't work directly on the issue of housing, and I don't know that anyone else on this panel does, which is unfortunate. However, I certainly hear from our colleagues who are involved in the work we do that they are very concerned about the possible sunset of the SCPI funds. They are very worried about how programs will continue in the absence of those funds come April 1.

I think it's very frustrating for people not to have clear answers at this point. We're doing our best to communicate with the federal government and are getting different answers—or no answers, really, at this point—about what is happening with SCPI funds, but the timeline is looming.

So as to how the communities and how these initiatives will pick up the slack, or how other funders will step in if the SCPI funds are withdrawn at the end of March.... The deadlines are getting pretty tight.

• (0935)

Hon. Geoff Regan: Does someone else have a view on this or have some knowledge in this area?

Ms. Denise Young: Like Ramona, I'm not an expert on housing. I'm also not an expert on jurisdiction; I know that government people are expert on that.

That said, however it is figured out, we need more affordable low-income housing. We need whatever programs need to be in place to be able to get that. We are really struggling as a community with affordable low-income housing.

Ms. Colleen Huston: There's one person I know who owns her own home and can't afford to get a furnace. She qualifies through the RRAP program. It's amazing when you think about it, that a furnace could set someone back and put them in poverty, with the risk of homelessness. But she didn't have the money to pay for it. Does she freeze in her house?

So I think the RRAP program needs more funding. You can only apply once every two years if you have something wrong with your house. But utilities go up in price, and you can't afford to pay the bills. There are some preventative things we can do to assist people in their housing. With Calgary housing especially, I think we need more support to make those places energy efficient.

I don't think it's acceptable for a person to sit in their house in the dark because they're afraid to turn on a light bulb.

Hon. Geoff Regan: Just to be clear, are you saying that in her case the problem is the increase in the utility bill, or are you saying that it's both that she has to pay part of the cost of the furnace as well as an increase in her utility bill?

Ms. Colleen Huston: It's the cost of using utilities and the price of keeping up a house. It's very difficult for people on a fixed income.

Hon. Geoff Regan: My impression is that RRAP would not cover the full cost of the furnace. Do you know if this is true?

Ms. Colleen Huston: She has to put the money up front.

Hon. Geoff Regan: I see.

Mr. Kirk Crowther: I have a brief comment.

We have to have a little greater vision. I don't know a lot about these programs, but these temporary ones are temporary fixes that last twelve or eighteen months and can do a real disservice to people on a limited income.

They get to where they are comfortable, and they have a good quality of life. Then eighteen months later the program is over and they're kind of back where they started.

There is certainly some frustration that we don't have this vision, that we're not continuing to support people, and the rules and regulations change after twelve or eighteen months.

Hon. Geoff Regan: Mr. Froese, you talked about the idea of getting employers to visit workplaces. I know that lots of employers are very busy. I think it's a good idea. What should the Government of Canada do to try to make that happen?

Mr. Dale Froese: To be perfectly honest, I think we should get together, sit down, and collaborate. We should join to help and support each other through this.

Thank you.

Hon. Geoff Regan: Does anyone want to add to that?

Ms. Jodi Cohen: I want to follow up on a comment that Kirk made, and it relates to the whole issue of the sustainability of funding—whatever the specific program is.

I am familiar with our Routes to Work program that CMHA is involved with. But nowadays, we have a lot of non-profit organizations providing human services in many areas, and sustainable funding is a critical issue that cuts across the whole spectrum.

I realize the federal government doesn't always have a role in this. But you're putting a lot of energy and resources into applying for funds to continue programs every year, because they're funded on an annual basis. If there was more sustainable funding with a long-term commitment, there would be a lot of efficiencies in terms of the kinds of services being provided, particularly in the non-profit world.

The Chair: Thank you.

Thank you, Mr. Regan.

I'm going to add one question, since we're on this topic.

One of the things we've heard, as we've been across the country—in the east and the west—is that the Opportunities Fund, which keeps rising up as one that makes a big difference, has been underfunded over the years. Not much has changed in terms of the dollar amount. Would you make a couple of recommendations to us? I'm assuming the Opportunity Fund is one of those funds that we need to go back and really make sure is doing what it should, that it's helping people out. I've heard this.

Is there any other particular program that you would like to recommend to our committee to go back and recommend to the government?

• (0940)

Ms. Jodi Cohen: Certainly the Opportunities Fund is the program that funds our program, which I'm familiar with. The Routes to Work program has been running since 2000. It operates in seven communities and helps hundreds of people get into the workforce and stay there.

But a lot of energy is spent going through the annual applications process.

The Chair: So once again there's the sustainable funding part versus programs that expire, and we have to start over again.

Ms. Jodi Cohen: Yes, and certainly increase funding. If there was a Routes to Work program in every municipality, we would have a lot more people with mental illness more gainfully employed. Certainly there is always the issue of funding.

The Chair: Sure.

Does anyone want to comment on any programs that are particularly...? That's it, just the Opportunities Fund. Okay. That's a recommendation. No, just kidding.

Voices: Oh, oh!

The Chair: Come on. Everyone should smile.

Mr. Lessard.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Yves Lessard: It would seem obvious that being disabled has a big impact on the level of poverty. I think you have clearly explained that.

I may not have too many questions to ask, but I would like to come back on a statement by my Conservative colleague. This morning, I feel completely dismayed. I want to make these remarks before our panel just to make sure I understood you well. We are having a problem here.

I worked a lot on affordable housing. In Quebec, we have two programs: the federal affordable housing program and a program called AccèsLogis, to make access to housing easier.

You said that one of the reasons why there are less affordable housing units is that a number of them have been converted into other things, including cottages. I have to tell you I find it devastating that this should ever happen in a Canadian province. I have never seen such a thing in Quebec. And I worked with people from other provinces, and I have never witnessed such a thing. Usually, cottages are in the countryside near a lake. But affordable housing units are usually in an urban setting. Also, it is generally rich people who have a cottage. I want to make things clear for fear that this would set us off in the wrong direction.

In the early eighties, a ratio was determined about the vacancy rate that relieves pressure on costs. It means that in each municipality, if the vacancy rate is higher than 3%, costs are reigned in automatically and there is less pressure on costs. Over time, starting in the nineties, the federal government stopped contributing 1% for affordable housing units, when in the seventies and in the early eighties, it was contributing in each of the provinces in order to keep a steady supply of new affordable housing units, and targeting communities where the vacancy rate was less than 3%. In the nineties, this contribution was cancelled. It has been reinstated just in 2001. That is why we do not have enough affordable housing units. This is the first correction that needs to be made.

Second, it has been determined that in order to have a decent living, one should not have to spend more than one week's salary on housing. Otherwise, there is a problem. In Quebec, for example, more than 35% of low income people spend more than 50% of their income on housing. Even worse than that, 7% of them spend more than 75% of their income on housing. It is easy to realize that

housing problems and the lack of affordable units has an impact on poverty. I wanted that to be clear.

Something similar happens with employment insurance. Yesterday, I pointed that out when a Bloc Québécois bill passed on second reading to set conditions such as those you raised, like a 360-hour requirement to be eligible to EI benefits; an increase in the number of weeks of benefits; and independent workers coverage. This bill was passed on second reading. Let us hope it will also be passed on third reading.

My question is for all of you. How do you approach the following problem? You are talking about challenging situations people are in, but the government is raking in huge surpluses and does not meet the needs of citizens. Oil companies get grants to the tune of \$250 million. Oil companies are not struggling. What do you think? How can this be justified? And not only the situation was not corrected, but it has even been made worse because of \$1 billion cuts. What do you think?

• (0945)

[*English*]

The Chair: You have time for a very short answer.

Mr. Lessard used up most of his time in his opening statement.

Who would like to talk?

Ms. Johnston.

Ms. Ramona Johnston: Sure.

I think the role of organizations like ours is to raise these issues of poverty and all of the complex interrelated issues and put them on the public's radar screen, so that it becomes a priority for the community and the community says clearly to all levels of government that this needs to be reinstated as a priority. I think that's a role that the community and organizations like ours can play.

We would hope to see leadership at all levels of government, but we know that elected officials do sometimes need to be led by their constituents. We really see that as our role, to educate and inform the public about the depth and the breadth and the root causes of poverty in our community, and potential solutions, and then ask them to voice that to their elected officials—to raise it up and get it on the radar screen.

We know that here in Calgary poverty issues really aren't on the public radar screen right now, so to some extent we can't expect it to be on the radar screen of our governments either. We need the public to speak out.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Ms. Johnston.

We're going to move to Mr. Martin, for five minutes, please.

Mr. Tony Martin: Thank you very much.

I really do appreciate the focus on poverty here today because it needs to be talked about and talked about more. You're absolutely right. As politicians and as government we don't respond to things unless the public out there are making a hue and cry about it, and then we act. It's unfortunate that we don't take that leadership more often. I liken it to walking around with a gangrene foot and not doing anything about it. Eventually it'll kill you. It seems that oftentimes what government is more interested in is giving society a facelift and never mind the gangrene foot.

We heard a lot this morning about a huge resource of people out there—people struggling with mental health issues, people with disabilities, the poor—who are underutilized, underappreciated, and undervalued. Certainly in that, income security is huge. We talked a bit about that.

Housing is huge. Again I heard last night about affordable housing units being torn down in this community and expensive condos going up in their place. I heard people tell me that we have shelters in the downtown, but more and more people are being pushed out to the burbs, where transportation becomes a problem, and those kinds of things.

I heard a bit about this last night too. Education is a problem—affordable education. Poor families are sending their kids to college or university, and having the funds to pay the tuition is a huge problem.

Again, Ireland is a country that seems to be leading the European Union in economic growth. When it decided to change its fortunes in the seventies, the first thing it did was invest in education, and it made sure that absolutely everybody and anybody who lived in Ireland and called themselves an Irish citizen was given the opportunity to be educated to their maximum potential. That has paid off in spades. Not only do they provide free tuition for post-secondary and college, but they also provide grants to people who have to leave home to cover the cost of living. What a concept.

Do you have any recommendations for us to consider in terms of taking advantage of the talent that's out there, the education that's needed in the economy we live in, which is always changing? Should the federal government be working with the provinces to make sure that post-secondary education, for example, is free?

● (0950)

Ms. Colleen Huston: It certainly was one of our comments last night at the poverty meeting, that lots of people can't get post-secondary education. Also, one of our members has a problem with literacy. There are 44% of Canadians who have a hard time reading. I also recommend that post-secondary education should be free for people who are experiencing hardships, but I think at the basic level we just need basic literacy support. I think it's one in two people who can't read in Canada.

Mr. Tony Martin: And it's one of the cuts that happened by the government, the cuts in literacy. It's just hard to understand.

Ms. Colleen Huston: We've attached a presentation to ours called "Poverty Makes Me Sick". These are some more testimonials on the root causes of poverty that we'd welcome you to look at.

Ms. Lori Willocks: It's about changing the attitude as well. We're looking at giving funding to students not as a subsidy but as a long-term investment.

I can use an example of a client of mine who came here—he's an engineer—from Latin America and he was working in another province, I believe it was Quebec, as a security guard. He moved to Calgary and he was able to study at SAIT for ten months, and he got that program funded, not just the cost of the courses but also his living expenses. Now he's working at an engineering firm and he's making \$30 an hour, not as an engineer but as a technologist, but he's well on his way to getting back to where he was in his own country.

Things like that really need to be looked at, not just funding their courses but also living expenses and child care and things like that, so they can study full time and not have to work at the same time.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Martin. That's all the time we have.

We're going to move to our last questioner for this particular round, Ms. Yelich, for five minutes, please.

Mrs. Lynne Yelich: The housing picture that I was trying to give you of my hometown was an initiative of the federal and provincial governments about fifteen years ago. It was very helpful to small communities to have affordable housing, especially for seniors, so they built duplexes. However, it is very difficult to get people to move to the outskirts of a city now, as you said earlier, so these places remain vacant. The small towns have declined in population, so there is nobody to fill these.

We had talked at one time about even trying to get immigrants perhaps to settle when they were close to Saskatoon, and this was very discouraged. These units are now being sold off—and some of them are very, very nice units—for \$2,500 or \$3,000. People are moving them out of our community, when in fact what I was trying to say is that perhaps the provincial government could be encouraging people to have their first months in Canada in some of these communities that are close to the city, and encourage English as a second language classes perhaps out there in our schools.

There are all sorts of ideas out there to make use of our small communities as well, when we have housing that is vacant right now. There are some very well-furnished units, and they are on the outskirts of our communities. I don't know if all provinces did that, but our province had an aggressive movement, and we have a lot of them.

That is why I wonder where the federal government should be when it comes to these affordable housing initiatives. Perhaps the province has to have a little more in it, so they don't just sell these off when they feel there's no need. Because whatever does happen in our province.... The population is declining, and everybody is moving here, to Calgary.

I still wanted you to continue on with the Irish model that you indicated earlier. I think that was a very interesting concept, the ponying up of wages. Do you want to tell us a little more? Is there any more that you wanted to add about how you found Ireland?

Ms. Denise Young: I'm not sure I have a ton more to add, but I think it's an example of some great best-practice models that are out there. There's also some great anti-poverty work being done in Australia, by bringing together the different levels of government, along with labour and safe communities, to look at all the pieces.

I think that's what happens with a lot of our work. One government will say that it's not their area, it's someone else's, and then people get lost in the cracks in between.

So I think a role the federal government can play is to identify some of those great best-practice models, like the employment models in Ireland, and produce some information so that communities have that information available to them to say that this is something we might be able to do in our community.

You were talking about the SARCAN stuff. I'm quite familiar with that, because our organization runs an international disability film festival, and there have been some great videos produced about that. And being able to access that information to look at those models is another piece of the puzzle. So that, to me, is the point of those.

• (0955)

Mrs. Lynne Yelich: When it comes to levels of government, it always surprises me how little we can interfere in provincial jurisdictions. I think probably that's where we have the biggest problem in creating a good disability act, because so much of this falls under the provinces, and the provinces don't always agree on where the federal government should be. I think our roles could be defined better, but they aren't.

When it comes to a poverty benchmark, should it be full participation? Is that a benchmark you want to have? You mentioned that you need full participation support. Is that a benchmark, or are you talking about trying to get an economic benchmark? I'd like to know, when you speak about having to eradicate poverty, what the benchmarks are that we have to have. Are you talking about, as I said, participation and full support in workplaces, or are you talking more about trying to get the minimum wage up, which was one of your suggestions? Would you just like to tell me what you expect the federal government to have as a benchmark for eradicating poverty?

Ms. Ramona Johnston: I'd like to see the federal government work with other levels of government and with the community to

facilitate full participation, not just in the economic life of our community but in the social and political and family life of the community—so a very holistic approach.

I'm glad we've been able to have this opportunity to speak about some of the underlying issues related to employability, such as affordable housing, and it's great that we've spoken so much about it. It's hard for us to believe here in Calgary that we would ever have an excess of affordable housing, but I can understand how that could happen in other communities. That's why a national housing initiative couldn't distance itself from the local community. Certainly, the federal government should not ever be working in isolation from the provincial governments and the local municipal government.

It's very frustrating for us as a community to find ourselves frequently in the position of acting as marriage brokers or marriage counsellors between different levels of government. As Denise said, we go to one level of government and we think that's the appropriate level, and while we're trying to bring all three levels to the table around a policy issue, we are continually just passed back and forth between different levels, hearing "It's not our responsibility", and then within a level of government we're being told it's not any one department's responsibility.

So we need much better communication and collaboration within levels of government and across levels of government if we're ever going to make real, sustainable changes to these policies.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Johnston, and thank you, Ms. Yelich.

That's all the time we have.

Once more, I want to thank all the witnesses for being out here today. As we have travelled across this country from St. John's to Vancouver and now back—we're finishing up in Saskatoon tomorrow—we have had some great ideas. We appreciate your taking time out of your busy schedules to be here today to represent those issues that are close to your heart.

Once again, thank you for taking the time to be here.

The meeting is adjourned.

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